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# BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No 41

THE BOY AND  
THE DEACON  
or Enemies for Life



BY HARRIE IRVING HANCOCK

"Now, march on before me," said Ben to the captured highwayman, "and remember that I have you covered with

# BRAVE & BOLD

*A Different Complete Story Every Week*

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## THE BOY AND THE DEACON;

OR,

## Enemies for Life.

By HARRIE IRVING HANCOCK.

### CHAPTER I.

#### BEN AND THE OLD DEACON.

"Well, Ben, lookin' for work, I s'pose?"

"I'm always ready for any honest work, deacon—that is, when there's any pay attached to it."

"That's gen'rally the rule. There's not many who labor for nothin'—not even in the Lord's vineyard."

The deacon followed this last remark with a thin and rather discordant cackle, which was as near to a laugh as he ever got.

It was evident that he felt he had said something very good, and Ben Spencer permitted himself to grin, as labor is in duty bound to capital.

Deacon Bumpus stood on the veranda of the only store in Wadeville. It was the deacon's store, too.

Moses Jeremiah Bumpus had passed the estate of middle age some years ago.

He had lived in Wadeville all his life, and, to the comfortable property left him by his parents, now long dead, he had by the greatest industry—and the greatest parsimony as well—contrived to amass a considerable fortune, although he was usually inclined to deny this fact for self-gratulation.

He was a shining light in the church, was Deacon Bumpus.

He loved to lead at the weekly prayer meeting, too, though his nasal voice was far from musical.

He believed thoroughly in his right to lead in the singing on Sundays, for he held that sincere devotion and piety were more acceptable to the Lord than mere harmony of tone.

In matters of business the deacon was also at home.

He was noted for being able to drive a sharp bargain, and thought this in no way inconsistent with the broad principles of Christianity.

When a poor farmer was obliged to run up a long bill at the store, the deacon was wont to relate the parable of the servant who was forgiven a great debt, though he never forgave the debt.

He merely extended the credit, in exceptionally deserving cases, and took great pains to collect his own all in good time.

Had you asked the average resident of Wadeville, he would probably have informed you that the deacon was a "leetle close," but a good man, nevertheless, and a credit to the village.

Perhaps none of his neighbors loved him, but the deacon was generally respected, all the same.

Ben Spencer was the only son of a poor widow who took in washing, went out by the day to do cleaning, or did any honest work that would enable her to pay her way in the world, for Mrs. Spencer had a fervent horror of shiftlessness or debt.

Ben was a good boy, and, though not quite sixteen, he had earned many a dollar for his mother in various ways.

Now he looked eagerly at the deacon, who had offered him a prospect of earning a little money.

"What do you want me to do, deacon?"

"Well, boy, I ain't quite sure I want ye to do anything."

"If you do, please tell me quick, for time is money, and I've got to convert as much of my leisure into cash as I can during this summer vacation."

"How you talk," muttered the deacon. "In my time, boys didn't have so much to say 'bout money. They was glad to work

all they could, an' they was gen'rally satisfied when they had enough to eat an' enough to cover their backs."

"It takes money to accomplish even that," Ben retorted. "Please tell me what you want done, and I'll get right down to work."

Deacon Bumpus paused irresolutely.

He was plainly uneasy at the prospect of having to part with money in exchange for such a commonplace thing as work.

"Mebbe ye'd jest as soon take out your pay in something from the store," he finally suggested.

Ben shook his head.

"There's nothing in the store that I want to-day, thank you."

"Oh, I'll credit ye with it, boy, an' ye can take it out in trade when ye git ready to buy."

"When I get ready to buy," Ben returned, "I can pay the cash."

"Mebbe there's something in the store that your mother'd like."

"She always pays cash for what she buys, as you know, deacon, and I believe she has in all the supplies that she wants for the present. I shall be glad to work for you, but I want my pay in cash."

There was a look of pain in the deacon's seamed and rugged face. It came so hard to part with money.

"Well, follow me," he said, at last, stepping off the veranda and leading the way with the air of one who is resolved upon a desperate course.

Ben followed him to the rear of the store. The deacon pointed to a pile of wood.

"How much d'ye want, boy, to saw an' split thet wood?"

Ben made a critical survey of the pile, and then responded promptly:

"Twenty cents, deacon."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the astonished Bumpus.

And then, in some confusion, he added:

"Boy, if thet's counted up ag'in me in heaven as a swear-word, ye'll be morally responsible for it. D'ye know what the Bible has to say about extortioners?"

"About those who require a great deal of work for very little money?" Ben inquired, innocently.

"No, not jest thet," the deacon responded, a little disconcerted by the grave regard of Ben's honest, half-mirthful blue eyes. "Now, see here, boy," he went on, as if in haste to follow up a fancied advantage, "I'll tell ye jest what I'll do. There's 'bout an hour's work in thet pile for a strong, healthy boy like you. Ten cents an hour's pretty good pay for a boy like you, an' thet's what I'll give ye to saw an' split thet wood."

Ben knew from experience that it would be quite useless to attempt to get the deacon to raise the price after he had once set it. So the boy looked at the pile once more, and said, reluctantly: "I'll do it, deacon, for ten cents."

"Well, mebbe ye'd better tackle it, then," the deacon, answered, slowly. "Mis' Marston says she's got to have more wood if I want my supper cooked, an' I reely ain't got the time to do the job myself. The world's goin' wrong nowadays. When I was a young man a woman who worked out wa'n't above choppin' what wood she needed for the cookin' stove."

With this shot at the degeneracy of the times, the deacon walked around to the front of the store with the air of a man who already regrets a bargain that is ruinous to himself.

"The deacon is rather stingy," mused Ben, taking off his coat and placing a log across the saw-horse. "If I didn't really need work I'd hold out for fifteen cents; but the first crop of hay is all in, and work's likely to be scarce for the next month."

Saying which, he fell to work with a will.

Log after log was reduced to stove-length with a rapidity that

was astonishing, for Ben Spencer was an industrious lad, and had been reared to the hard work of New England rural life.

When the last log had fallen from the horse, he paused a moment to wipe the streaming perspiration from his face and neck, and then fell to with the ax.

At last this latter half of the task was finished, and throwing down the ax and picking up his jacket, Ben went into the store.

"Well, deacon, I've done the job."

Moses Bumpus drew his old silver chronometer from his pocket, and a crestfallen look came into his face.

"See here, Ben Spencer," he exclaimed, reproachfully, "you've only been fifty minutes 'bout that job."

"But I've sawed up all the wood, and split it, too."

"That ain't the point. I hired ye to do an hour's work."

"I thought ye hired me to saw and split that wood."

"I want a full hour's work," replied Deacon Bumpus in a nettled tone. "Go back out there, boy, an' ye'll find some old rotten boards in one corner. Chop away on them for ten minutes, an' then yer work's done."

Ben was too angry at this to trust himself to say a word, so he marched silently to the rear of the store, and put in ten minutes more at hot, hard work.

Then once more he presented himself at the counter.

"I've filled the contract now, deacon."

"Then, I s'pose ye want yer pay, though I must say ye've earned it easy."

"It doesn't strike me that way," Ben retorted, with a smile.

"Are ye sure ye don't want to take it out in trade?" the old man demanded, anxiously.

"Quite sure; I'd rather have the money."

The deacon went slowly into the back office of the store, and came back with a ten-cent piece, which he laid reluctantly on the counter.

"You've done a pretty profitable hour's work, boy," he remarked, grudgingly. "In my time a boy was glad to make that much in a hull forenoon."

"Times have improved, deacon, and wages are higher than then. You must make an effort to keep abreast of the times."

The deacon glared upon his late employee with intense wrath. "Thet sounds well from you, Ben Spencer," he blurted. "Why, if it hadn't been for me, ye'd have been a poor workhouse brat, where they'd make ye work hard for sixteen hours a day, and not a cent o' money would ye git for it."

Ben's face flushed hotly at this thrust.

"You've no occasion to talk that way, deacon," he cried. "I'm sure you've never done anything for my mother or me."

"Mebbe I ain't," muttered the deacon, "an' mebbe I have. 'Tain't likely ye know much 'bout it, boy."

Inwardly Ben Spencer was at a white heat now.

But he managed to choke down his wrath enough to say, respectfully:

"Deacon Bumpus, if you meant anything by what you said, I've a right to ask an explanation."

"Ye can ask, if ye want to."

"If I owe you a debt of gratitude, or of anything else, I ask you to let me know."

"Go 'long, boy. It's time ye was home to dinner, an' I've nothin' to say to ye."

The deacon closed his mouth, and compressed his lips so firmly that Ben decided it was not worth while to persist.

But, as the boy walked rapidly homeward, his mind was full of the problem which Deacon Bumpus' hasty words had stirred up.

## CHAPTER II.

## A SURPRISE FOR BEN SPENCER.

Mrs. Spencer, fat, fair, and nearly forty, stood on the shady porch of her little cottage.

"Dinner is waiting for you, Ben," she said, as our hero came in through the gate. "It is so warm to-day that I stepped out on the porch to get the benefit of what cool air there is. What have you been doing, my boy? You look warm and tired."

"I have been working at a little job, mother. Here is the money."

He handed her the dime.

Mrs. Spencer looked rather displeased.

"Only ten cents, Ben? I would rather you wouldn't work on such a hot day as this, when there is so little money in it as this."

"But I thought even ten cents would be handy for something," the boy protested.

"So it will, Ben, so it will; but I don't like to have you work hard for such small returns. You did splendidly during haying time, and you must not wear yourself out now, if you mean to accomplish wonders when school opens again. We have quite a little ready money in the house now, and I don't like to see you working so hard. Who could have had the heart to set a boy to work for ten cents on such a day as this?"

"Deacon Bumpus hired me to cut wood for an hour."

Mrs. Spencer's ejaculation of "Oh!" expressed volumes, for the deacon's close-fistedness in money matters was proverbial in Wadeville.

They seated themselves at the table, and Ben ate with an appetite that was in no way diminished by the work he had done.

He was unusually silent during the meal.

When it was over he suddenly pushed his plate away and demanded:

"Mother, what did Deacon Bumpus mean when he said that, if it hadn't been for him, I'd have been a workhouse brat?"

"Did the deacon say that?" demanded Mrs. Spencer, in distress.

"Yes, mother."

Now, when it was too late, our hero regretted his abrupt question, for the look of pain on Mrs. Spencer's face was intense.

Tears stood in her eyes.

And Ben would rather have had his question go unanswered than to have caused her this evident distress, for he loved his mother deeply for her unselfish goodness to him.

"It was very unkind of the deacon," she faltered, and the tears began to course slowly down her cheeks.

Ben was on his feet in an instant and at his mother's side.

"Never mind, mother," he cried, kissing her. "I don't want to know, anyway. I wouldn't have asked if I had supposed it would cause you so much grief."

"You will have to be answered some day, anyway," said Mrs. Spencer, with a deep sigh.

"Then I will wait patiently until that day comes," Ben replied, soothingly.

Mrs. Spencer was silent for some moments and then she said:

"Ben, I have always intended to tell you some time, and I suppose you are old enough to know now, as well as any other time. But tell me, my boy, have you never suspected the truth?"

The boy was gazing intently at the floor, but he felt the anxious gaze of her eyes.

"I have sometimes thought," he answered, slowly, "sometimes thought—forgive me—that—that perhaps you were not my own mother."

Mrs. Spencer now sobbed aloud.

"Oh, my boy, it is useless to defy the instinct. I am not your

mother, though God knows I have done my best all these years to be a mother to you. I—I——"

She broke down now in a fit of choking sobs.

"You have always been a mother to me," he cried, throwing his arms about her. "No boy in town has had so good a mother as I. And, before long, I hope I shall be able to begin to pay it all back to you. I shall always take good care of you, mother, for mother I shall always call you."

Mrs. Spencer began to dry her eyes.

"Then you don't love me less, Ben, when you know I am not your mother? I have always loved you as if you were my own child."

She needed no answer. The look in Ben's eyes was sufficient.

Both sat in silence for some time.

Then Ben went on:

"Can you tell me who my mother was? for I presume, of course, that she is dead."

Mrs. Spencer shook her head.

"No one knows, my boy—at least, none save Him who knows all things."

"But what did Deacon Bumpus mean? What is he to me?"

"It happened years and years ago, Ben," she began, slowly. "When you were a tiny baby, you were left in a basket on the deacon's front doorstep one night. He took you in, and Patience Marston, his housekeeper, cared for you that night."

"But the deacon could not keep you permanently, and so he came to me. I had just lost my baby, and my heart was hungry for a little one to love. The next morning the deacon brought you down, in the same basket, and offered me two hundred and fifty dollars to legally adopt you."

"The deacon offered you two hundred and fifty dollars to adopt me?" Ben cried, incredulously.

"Yes, Ben. I think I began to love you as soon as I lifted you out of the basket. But my husband and I were very poor, and the money offered was an inducement, as it would just pay off the mortgage on this cottage."

"So we adopted you. When you were not over three years old my dear husband died, and you have only an indistinct recollection of one of the best men that ever lived."

"But I can't understand," Ben broke in, "why Deacon Bumpus should ever pay so much money for such a little thing. It must have broken his heart, or he must have been a much more liberal man in years past than he is now."

"He said it was a good deal of money to pay," Mrs. Spencer went on. "But he said that somehow it seemed as if the Lord had had a hand in leaving that basket on his doorstep, and he felt that he wasn't doing his duty to the Lord if he didn't make some provision for the little babe."

"It seems incredible," Ben insisted, musingly. "Mother, Deacon Bumpus must have had some other motive which he didn't want to tell you. I can't believe that he did it out of simple goodness of heart."

"I know the deacon is rather a close man, but I am afraid you don't do him full justice, my son, for I am sure that he acted from generous and disinterested motives in doing as he did by you. He told me that he felt he was a steward of the Lord."

"From a good many men I would believe that," muttered Ben. "But somehow I can't swallow it when it comes to Deacon Bumpus. He had some other motive, you can depend upon it, mother, and some day I mean to find out what it was."

Mrs. Spencer shook her head deprecatingly.

"I am afraid, my son, that you are liable to form hasty judgments. It is a way with young people, I think. I remember that I was apt to be that way. It may be that I am, even to-day, al-

though I struggle never to jump too quickly to conclusions. However unsparing we may be, Ben, in our judgment of ourselves, we should always endeavor to be generous, and even indulgent in our estimate of others."

Mrs. Spencer now began to bustle about with the dinner things, washing, scouring and putting away.

Ben picked up a book and sat down to read, but his mind was so full of his own affairs that it was a fruitless attempt.

When he had sat thus for some moments, staring blankly at the open pages, he heard a familiar whistle from the street, followed by a voice shouting:

"Ben—Ben Spencer! Oh-h-h, Ben!"

Our hero answered the whistle, and took his cap.

"There's Tom Foley, mother. I think I'll go out with him for a while."

"Very well, my son."

In view of what had just transpired, Ben went up to Mrs. Spencer, and surprised her by kissing her very affectionately.

"Always the same mother to me," he whispered, and then ran out to meet his especial chum.

Tom Foley was a short, thick-set boy, a year younger than Ben, with a mass of stubborn red hair and the prize freckles of Wadeville on his round, honest-looking face.

He was a boy of generous but rash impulses, who got into many scrapes, and who would have got into many more if it had not been for the restraining influence that Ben Spencer exercised over him.

Tom was, at this moment, sitting on the grass by the wayside, critically examining a stone bruise on one of his brown, bare feet.

"Where are you going, Tom?"

"Oh, anywhere. Hain't got nothing to do but tramp around. Didn't wanter stay at home, 'cause I knew father'd ask me to sort over some old iron, and it's too hot to work in that blazing shop such an afternoon as this."

Judson Foley, Tom's father, was the blacksmith of Wadeville.

"How would you like to go fishing up the creek?" Ben suggested.

"Nope. Too hot to dig bait, and fish too lazy to bite."

"The fish are not the only things that are lazy," Ben retorted, with a meaning smile.

Tom was quick to comprehend this thrust.

"You always was a great feller to work, Ben. Somehow I don't take to it in the same way."

"I don't like work for the mere sake of work," Ben replied, "but I do like it when it brings in anything. But, then, mother is poorer than your folks."

"My folks are poor enough," Tom asserted, positively. "Why, I asked dad for three dollars to buy that old punt of Tom Butts, so I could paddle around on the pond. What do you s'pose dad told me?"

"That it would cost more than that to fish you up from the bottom of the pond?"

"Nope. Said three dollars didn't grow on the bushes around here."

"No, it doesn't, either."

"So I don't see but what we're poor enough," Tom Foley wound up, dolefully.

Then Ben told his chum of the wood-chopping episode of the morning, refraining, however, from mentioning the talk he had just had with his mother.

"I tell you what, Ben," Tom declared, "old Bumpus is a h-y-p-o-k-r-i-t—hypocrite! He's so mean that I shouldn't think the grass'd be willing to grow on his land."

## CHAPTER III.

### WHICH RELATES SEVERAL INCIDENTS.

The boys strolled slowly along the shady streets of the village, and eventually brought up at the store—that center of all excitement in a country village.

It was not a very lively place on this afternoon, however, for the heat of the day kept all people inside who were not obliged to work out of doors.

Ben and Tom Foley seated themselves on the veranda, which was on the shady side of the street.

"Whew!" sputtered Tom, mopping his face, "I am glad I don't have to work for a living to-day. I don't see how anybody can work in weather like this."

Deacon Bumpus, coming from the inside of the store, overheard this remark.

"Idleness is the parent o' debt and crime," he commented, sententiously.

The old man looked up and down the street, and, there being no possible customer in sight, he proceeded to exemplify his idea of industry by tipping back in his chair and going soundly to sleep, with the side of the building for a pillow.

After a few moments his lips parted, and he began to snore mellifluously.

"He's dead to the world," whispered Tom. "A man who lays awake nights to think how he can cheat his neighbors is a daisy sleeper in the daytime. Hello, here comes Mr. Paul."

Farmer Paul was slowly approaching the store, his round, rubicund face glowing and perspiring under a straw hat with a prodigiously broad brim.

He was by all odds the most popular man in town with the boys, for he was a jolly old bachelor, who never forgot that he had once been a boy.

"And I was a terror, too, I tell ye," he was wont to wind up. "When it comes to tellin' the truth, neighbor, the boys o' to-day are a durned sight better behaved than their daddies was."

"Brother Bumpus is asleep, I see," he remarked, as he gained the veranda.

The deacon awoke at the sound of the voice.

"Ah, Brother Paul, glad to see ye, glad to see ye. What can I sell ye to-day?"

"Nothin'—nothin'. Jest dropped around to set in the shade."

The deacon arose and went into the store, and the farmer promptly appropriated the vacant chair.

The rattle of wheels was heard down the street, and a farm wagon came in sight with a stout, middle-aged woman and three small children on the seat.

"There's Mis' Briggs," said Paul. "She's a plucky woman, I tell ye. Husban' died a year ago and left her six children, an' she a-runnin' the farm, with only one of her boys big enough to help her at all. She's a woman that deserves a lift."

The object of his remarks drove up to the store and the deacon came out rubbing his hands.

"Deakin," said Mrs. Briggs, "here's some butter an' eggs I wanter sell ye—eighteen dozen eggs an' ten pounds o' butter. How much be ye payin'?"

"Cash, ma'am, or trade?" demanded the deacon, solemnly.

"Cash, deakin—I want money bad."

"I can give ye nine cents a dozen, ma'am, an' fourteen cents a pound for the butter."

Mrs. Briggs' face showed her disappointment.

"Things has gone down, then, has they, deakin?" she demanded, anxiously.

"Yes, Mis' Briggs, an' little market at any price."

"That's too bad; an' I need money so terrible."

The trade was consummated at the figures, and the deacon began to carry the stuff into the store.

Farmer Paul approached the woman and said, quietly:

"I don't want'er break off no trade thet's been made, Mis' Briggs, but the next time ye've got any produce to sell, Mis' Briggs, bring it to me, an' I'll get ye a better price, if I hev to cart the stuff to town for ye."

The woman nodded her head gratefully, but said nothing, for just then the deacon came out with the money, and Mrs. Briggs drove off.

"Brother Bumpus," said Paul, "it's none o' my business, but it seems to me thet ye gave thet woman a drefful poor price for her stuff."

"I had to," groaned the deacon. "The market's terrible poor, an' like as not the stuff'll spile on my hands 'fore I can sell it."

"Nonsense!" muttered Paul, under his breath.

Tom Foley had witnessed the scene with intense indignation, for he calculated that the old man had given the widow at least a dollar less than he could have bought from a better-posted seller.

"Deacon Bumpus," he demanded, "do you ever read the Bible?"

The old man faced his youthful interrogator with a look of intense astonishment, and Farmer Paul gave vent to a hearty roar of laughter.

"Do I read the Bible?" he ejaculated. "An' me a deakin o' the church!"

"Did you ever read what the good book has to say about defrauding widows and orphans?" Tom persisted.

Bumpus' face turned scarlet.

"Boy, you're pesky fresh," he muttered.

"Master Tom gave ye a good one then, deakin," roared Mr. Paul, who was purple in the face from choking laughter.

The old man stumped into the store, too mad to answer.

Farmer Paul and the two boys had the veranda to themselves for a few minutes, at the end of which time an aristocratic-looking woman, dressed in the finest of summer raiment, was seen approaching.

She was Mrs. Eastman, a widow, who lived in the big house on the hill, by all odds the most imposing residence in Wadeville.

Mrs. Eastman was reputed to be wealthy, and she certainly kept all her neighbors at a most disdainful distance.

Her only son, Egbert, was equally aristocratic in his pretensions. He dressed like a dandy, and took great delight in displaying his handsome gold watch to the envious boys of the village.

Mrs. Eastman now approached with dainty tread, holding a flimsy lace parasol to shield her eyes from the terrible glare of the sun.

Deacon Bumpus, from the interior of the store, saw her approaching, and hastened to greet her, lifting his worn straw hat from his white locks with an attempt at graceful courtesy that was pathetic.

"There's your dog, Ben," said Tom.

Ben saw the animal a little way up the street, and whistled.

"Here, Rover, Rover!" he called.

The deacon was bowing low before Mrs. Eastman, who received his attentions with a condescending nod.

"Fine day, Mis' Eastman, but terribul hot," Deacon Bumpus was saying, when—

Rover, obedient to his young master's call, came flying with eager bounds, and, regardless of obstacles, ran between the old man's legs, and sent him ignominiously to earth.

But the damage did not end here, for as the deacon's feet shot

from under him, he tripped Mrs. Eastman, who seated herself abruptly on the ground, with a shock that must have jarred her entire system.

The situation was ridiculous to an extreme.

The deacon looked dazed and crestfallen, while Mrs. Eastman glanced at him with a rage and a disgust that were unutterable.

Farmer Paul arose and rushed into the store, whence came sounds of choking laughter.

The boys, too, exploded with laughter.

Deacon Bumpus scrambled shamefacedly to his feet.

"Allow me to 'sist ye to rise, Mis' Eastman," he said, humbly.

Mrs. Eastman's tone was freezing.

"Thank you, sir, I have already had sufficient of your assistance."

And rising unaided, she swept grandly down the street.

"Ye young whelp!" roared the deacon, "what made ye play thet trick on me?"

Ben stifled his laughter, and replied:

"I really didn't mean to, deacon. I called the dog, but I had no idea he would upset you."

Deacon Bumpus lifted one foot to kick the dog, but a warning growl and a spring from Rover made him beat a precipitate retreat into the store. From the inside he shouted:

"You boys clear out! I won't have ye loafin' on my piazzer."

The boys sauntered down the street, accompanied by the dog.

They had not gone far when they met Egbert Eastman, as dandified as ever, seated on a stone wall.

He had witnessed his mother's discomfiture. He did not mind that particularly, but it enraged him to see the two chums laughing at her.

"You'd better be more careful with your blamed dog after this," Bert Eastman remarked, disagreeably.

"It wasn't intentional on my part," Ben replied, good-naturedly. "I wish you would tell your mother so from me."

"Won't tell her nothing of the sort," Bert retorted, savagely.

And then he added, tauntingly:

"Your mother takes in washing."

Ben Spencer was nettled at this.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," he retorted, sharply. "and poor as she is, she pays all her bills."

This was a keen home-thrust, for it was well known in the village that Mrs. Eastman, despite her reputed wealth, took a long time to pay her debts.

Bert flushed angrily, and then cried, sneeringly:

"Your mother is a low woman."

He could have said nothing else that would have angered Ben more.

Our hero slipped off his jacket, and threw it on the grass.

"You'll have to fight me, Eastman, for saying that," he remarked, with a calmness that effectually concealed his great wrath.

The juvenile dandy, seeing that there was no help for it, slipped off his jacket, too.

Then the two boys faced each other.

Ben assumed the aggressive from the start. In less than three minutes, Bert Eastman, with a bleeding nose and one eye closed, cried:

"I've got enough."

"Then beg my pardon," retorted Ben, panting.

"No, I won't."

"Then I'll keep at you until you do."

Ben advanced to carry out his threat.

"Hold on, Ben Spencer! I beg your pardon."

Saying which, Bert seized his jacket, and beat a hasty retreat, muttering:

"I'll get square with that low-lived Spencer, if it costs me my life!"

Deacon Bumpus and Farmer Paul had witnessed the whole affair from the store veranda.

"That Ben's a plucky chap, deakin," observed Paul.

"He'll end his days in jail," growled the deacon, "an' Tom Foley'll be his cellmate."

"Ye talk, deakin, as if ye'd like to see thet come to pass."

"Mebbe I would," muttered Deacon Bumpus, so low that the farmer did not hear him.

## CHAPTER IV.

### BEN'S ENEMIES TRIUMPH.

The week passed, and Saturday came around.

That was always a busy evening with the deacon, for then it was that a great many villagers bought their entire supplies for the following week.

There was far more than one man could do to wait upon all the customers, and so Deacon Bumpus was compelled to engage extra help for Saturday evenings.

Though he did not like either Ben Spencer or Tom Foley, yet the boys were popular with the people of Wadeville, and were also very handy about the store.

So he generally called their services into requisition, sometimes for money, but more often for some other consideration.

Ben and Tom presented themselves at the store early on this particular Saturday evening.

"Going to have any work for us to-night, deacon?" Ben inquired.

"Mebbe. What d'ye want fer workin' for me?"

"Will you pay us cash?"

"No, sir! Money's too scarce."

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do, deacon. Tom and myself want to go hunting some day next week. Now, you let us take your shotgun all next week, and thirty loads with it, and Tom and I will work for you to-night. We can go up to your house after the gun to-morrow forenoon."

Deacon Bumpus demurred for a while, claiming that this was an excessive bargain, but finding he could gain the boys' services with no less a concession, he finally agreed.

"But ye must work brisk, boys. I can't afford to keep ye here in idleness."

The customers began to come in soon after, and the boys worked with a will.

The next morning, Sunday, was much cooler than any day in the week had been, and after breakfast Ben and Tom set off for a stroll through the surrounding country.

During their walk, Spencer determined to take young Foley into his confidence.

So he told him all that he had learned from his adopted mother concerning his advent into Wadeville, and also how Deacon Bumpus had paid Mrs. Spencer out of his own pocket to adopt the baby stranger.

"There's something strange about all that," said Tom Foley, sagely. "It don't seem like the deacon to pay all that money to have you adopted, when he could just as well send you to a foundling asylum, without having to pay a cent for your keep. Ben, I tell you there's something queer about it. Deacon Bumpus had mighty good reasons for spending so much of his precious money upon you."

"Do you know what I believe, Tom?"

"Course I don't."

"I believe that the old man knows something about my origin. He might be able to tell me who my parents were."

"Why don't you ask him?" demanded Tom, breathlessly.

"Because that would do no good. If he has kept silent all these years, it is because he doesn't mean to tell any one what he knows. If I were to ask him, I should only put him on his guard."

"Oh, no, Tom; I have resolved upon a much better course than that. I mean to go into this matter without saying a word to any one, and, before I get through with the investigation, I am determined to know who and what I am."

"If the deacon has acted squarely in what he has done, I shall be grateful to him; if he has, on the other hand, done me or mine any wrong, then I mean to unmask and expose him. But I am resolved to know whether he has done me good or evil."

"And there's my hand, Ben Spencer," cried Foley. "I'll help you in any way you want me to."

"Then, first of all, Tom, keep my secret."

"I'll do it, Ben. I'm mum as a clam."

They had walked on a little farther, when Tom said:

"There's the deacon's home. S'pose we go down there now and get the gun?"

Deacon Bumpus was, of course, at church, but his housekeeper, Patience Marston, a woman of very uncertain age, was at home, for she always declared that when Sunday came she was too tired to go to church.

"Good-morning, Miss Marston," said Ben. "We have called for the gun and some ammunition which the deacon agreed to let us have."

"Yes, he's left it for ye," replied the housekeeper, "though, if I had my way, I'd never trust no boys with guns. Now mind, don't you shoot it off 'round this house."

They had not gone far, when Tom Foley, who was carrying the gun, persisted in stopping to load it.

"For we might see some game," he explained.

"But I wouldn't shoot on Sunday, Tom," protested Ben. "Give the poor animals the same day of rest that we enjoy."

They had gone a little farther, when Tom suddenly perceived a fine, fat rabbit darting to cover.

The butt of the gun flew to Tom's shoulder, and the next instant the Sabbath stillness was disturbed by a crashing explosion.

The rabbit toppled over dead, and the boys ran forward to secure their game.

"It's a plump one, Tom!" cried Ben, forgetting his scruples for the moment.

Now, it so happened that church had just "let out," and the good people of Wadeville, coming along in solemn procession, were horrified to hear the crash of the gun.

"Some ungodly man is desecrating our sacred day!" exclaimed Deacon Bumpus, in a horrified tone.

Bert Eastman, who was a little in advance of the rest, now came running back.

"It's Ben Spencer and Tom Foley!" he cried. "They've shot a rabbit."

The people returning from church now swept around a bend in the road and came full upon the two culprits.

Tom still held the gun, while Ben had the rabbit.

"So that's the unrighteous way you boys use the gun I was kind enough to let ye take?" exclaimed the deacon. "A shootin' on Sunday!"

Nearly all of the people bent reproving glances upon the boys, who stood there abashed and confused.

Bert Eastman, who had not yet got over the effects of his thrashing, enjoyed their discomfiture hugely.

"I was allus 'fraid them boys'd come to a bad end," declared the deacon, turning to the rest.

"I'll trounce you for this, Tom," declared his father.

And Mrs. Spencer added, gently:

"Ben, I am very sorry and grieved to find you thus engaged on the Sabbath."

"Parson, what d'ye think o' this?" demanded the deacon.

The Rev. Mr. Elkins, a thin, little, old man, who was greatly beloved in Wadeville, bent a mildly reproving glance upon the boys.

"They have done wrong, very wrong, of course," the clergyman said, slowly, "but we must bear in mind that our young friends are only boys. I know them both to be good boys, but boys will sometimes be thoughtless. I am sure they will not again break the Sabbath."

The parson started to move on again, as if he thought the matter disposed of, but Deacon Bumpus cried, harshly:

"That won't do. There's a law agin' huntin' on Sundays, an' the law is made for boys, as well as men. Constable, as one of the selectmen of this village, I call upon ye to arrest them boys for breaking the Sabbath. They must be learned a lesson."

"Surely, deacon," remonstrated Parson Elkins, "I trust you will not proceed to such an extreme measure as this. You surely don't want the boys sent to jail for mere boyish thoughtlessness?"

And Blacksmith Foley added:

"Leave the boys to their parents, deacon. They'll see that they're fully punished."

But the deacon was obdurate.

"As a selectman, I'm bound t' see that the laws are obeyed. Constable, do yer duty."

So Constable Farrar took our hero and Tom Foley in charge, and led them in disgrace through the streets to the village lock-up.

"Boys, I'm sorry fer ye," said the constable, as he locked them up. "The limitable punishment for yer offense is sixty days in the county jail."

And the boys were left to meditate in sorrow.

They had two enemies—Deacon Bumpus and Bert Eastman—who were anything but displeased at the course events had taken.

"That Spencer boy is gittin' too pesky fresh," muttered Deacon Bumpus. "A couple o' months in jail'll do him good, an' when he gits out mebbe he'll treat me with more respect."

"But most likely he'll feel so disgraced that he'll keep away from this town, an' then he'll go to the bad quick. I shan't be sorry t' see the last o' him."

Filled with which thoughts, the good old man went home to his Sunday dinner, while our two young friends languished in the lock-up without any.

## CHAPTER V.

### WHAT HAPPENED IN COURT.

The night that followed their arrest was not a pleasant one to Ben Spencer and Tom Foley, but they made the best of it.

The jail was such a flimsy and antiquated structure that the boys could undoubtedly have made their escape had they been so minded, but nothing was farther from their wishes.

Justice Brittain held court in the town hall at 9 A. M. every Monday and Thursday.

So the next morning our two young friends were conducted into his august presence. Justice Brittain was a little man, past sixty, who had dispensed the law in that part of the county for

the past thirty years. He knew personally almost every one who came within his jurisdiction.

There was great excitement in Wadeville that morning.

Insignificant as the charge against the boys was, it was the first criminal case that had been tried in the town hall for over a year, for the people of Wadeville were an orderly lot, and the bulk of their court business was of a civil nature.

The excitement of the people was shown in the fact that when the doors of the town hall opened nearly three hundred people entered and took seats.

The buzz of conversation ceased when Constable Farrar pounded on the floor with a staff and announced:

"The court!"

All the spectators arose to their feet as Justice Brittain entered and took his seat behind the desk on the platform.

The justice seemed surprised at the size of the crowd present.

"Is there any business to come before the court this morning, Mr. Constable?" he demanded.

"Yes, your honor, one criminal case—Benjamin Spencer and Thomas Foley, boys, are charged with hunting on the Lord's Day."

"Bring in the prisoners."

All eyes were centered upon the door as the constable re-entered between our two young friends, carrying the shotgun and the telltale carcass of the rabbit.

The boys felt their situation keenly, and Tom Foley, whose thoughtlessness had resulted so disastrously, was a picture of contrition.

"Prisoners," said the justice, "you are charged with hunting on the Lord's Day. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"I'm guilty, I s'pose," Tom muttered, shamefacedly. "I fired the gun off."

"Well, what have you to say?" demanded the justice, noticing that our hero hesitated.

"I imagine I am guilty, too, your honor," Ben responded. "I was with Tom when he shot the rabbit, and so I suppose I was a party to the affair."

Tom started to protest his friend's innocence, but the court interrupted him a little sharply.

"I would advise you, Master Spencer, to plead 'not guilty.' When the evidence is all in, I can better decide your guilt or innocence. A plea of not guilty simply means that you desire to have the evidence heard on both sides."

"Very well, your honor; I will plead not guilty, then."

"The evidence for the prosecution will now be heard," announced the justice.

The spectators were breathless. In the main, the two boys were popular with the people of the village, but there were many in that assembly who believed, with the deacon, that the laws must be upheld, no matter who the offenders were.

Constable Farrar was first put upon the stand. After he had told what he knew of the affair, Deacon Bumpus testified.

The old man got a little out of the line of "admissible evidence," and branched off into a dissertation of which the following is a part:

"A respect for the law, judge, is the foundation of all good order. I let the boys take my gun, thinkin' as how they would behave themselves with it. If I'd 'a' s'posed they was mediatin' a-goin' a-huntin' on Sunday, I'd a-let my tongue cleave to the ruff o' my mouth afore they'd got ther gun from me."

"This is a forrard age, justice. The youngsters o' to-day is too pesky fresh. If they can't naterally respect the sanctitude o' the Lord's Day, they must be made to do it."

"Amen!" responded a woman from one of the rear seats, and two or three other people echoed the cry.

"Order!" said the court, sternly. "This is not a prayer meeting."

Deacon Bumpus gazed at the justice in astonishment.

"I s'posed, judge, thet expressions o' piety were in good order anywhere."

"You are expressing your own opinions, deacon," Justice Brittain continued. "Since I do not understand that you have been retained as counsel for either side, I must ask you to confine yourself strictly to facts. If you have told all you know of the shooting of the rabbit by the defendants yesterday, you may step down, and make room for the next witness."

The deacon opened his mouth two or three times, but was so surprised that he could say nothing, and finally he stepped down, with the air of one who has tried to perform a grave duty, but has been prevented from carrying out his intention.

Two or three more witnesses were heard, and then the court decided that he had heard all the testimony that was needed for the prosecution.

"Now, boys, you can say what you have to say for yourselves, but only one at a time, please."

"Will you hear me first?" urged Tom Foley.

"Yes."

Tom arose, and stood ill at ease, with the eyes of all that vast assemblage upon him.

"Take your hands out of your pockets," admonished the court.

Tom did so, and stood more abashed than ever, looking first at the ceiling and then at the floor, and unable to articulate a single word.

"Proceed," commanded the court.

Tom was now so hopelessly confused that his tongue refused to wag, and he looked furtively at the court, standing awkwardly, and looking for all the world as if he wanted to run away.

"Stand up straight," ordered Justice Brittain, "and don't be afraid. Act just as if you were going to speak a piece at the school exhibition."

This gave Tom a cue.

He bowed low to the court, scraped awkwardly, hemmed two or three times, and then began, desperately:

"If you please, Mr. Brittain, it wasn't me at all—that is, I—I—I—mean it wasn't Ben Spencer. I was lugging the gun, and when I saw the rabbit I shot him. Ben didn't want me to do it, and he wa'n't no party to the shooting."

Saying which, Tom made another bow, and sat down in confusion.

Then Ben related all that had occurred, seeking in no way to screen himself at his chum's expense.

When Ben had finished speaking, Justice Brittain sat silent for a few moments, and the assemblage was breathless.

Upon his verdict depended whether the boys went to jail for a long or a short term, for there were few present who did not expect a finding of guilty against both of the prisoners.

Justice Brittain's words, therefore, fell as a surprise upon all present.

"It is clear to me," he said, "that the Spencer boy was no party to the offense charged. He was opposed to the shooting on the Sabbath, and would doubtless have prevented it if he could have done so. I therefore order that Benjamin Spencer be discharged from custody."

A buzz of voices ran around the courtroom, and Ben's mother and friends showed their delight at this verdict.

"Order!" shouted the court.

"As to the Foley boy," Justice Brittain went on, "there is

abundant evidence to warrant me in finding him guilty of the offense charged. As to the sentence I shall impose——"

Here the court hesitated again, and was silent for some moments. Then he resumed:

"It seems to me that this offense was not intended as a willful and flagrant violation of the law. It was, rather, the result of boyish thoughtlessness and natural exuberance of spirits. I therefore sentence the defendant, Foley, to pay a fine of two dollars, and in case the fine is not paid, he shall serve four days in the county jail."

"The fine is paid, your honor," Blacksmith Foley said, stepping forward and depositing the amount upon the judge's desk.

Deacon Bumpus was on his feet in a moment.

"Your honor, this punishment is too light."

"That is a matter for the court alone to determine," was the stern reply from the bench.

The deacon became more exasperated than ever, and shouted:

"Justice Brittain, the people o' Wadeville love law an' order, an' they won't stand sech justice as you're dispensin'."

"Another remark like that, deacon, and I shall fine you for contempt of court."

Deacon Bumpus said no more, but went out in a terrible rage. He had many sympathizers, for he had been so long looked upon as a prominent citizen and good man that the people were not yet ready to withdraw their respect and regard.

Ben came out, followed by Tom, who carried the gun.

"I want that gun back again," sputtered the deacon, attempting to take it.

"You can't have it until the week's up," Tom retorted, defiantly.

"I'm a-goin' to take that gun," said the deacon, firmly. "Ye shan't have no more chance to make bad use of it."

Mr. Foley here interfered.

"Deakin, ye've made my boy enough trouble about it already. He and Ben worked for ye on the understandin' they were to have the use of the gun for a week. If ye try to take thet gun away afore the week's up, I'll sue ye, sure as guns."

Blacksmith Foley was known to be a man of his word.

After some ineffectual sputtering, Bumpus decided not to take the gun, but set out for his store, accompanied by a large following of his sympathizers, from whom Parson Elkins somehow seemed to be absent.

As for Ben and Tom, they were surrounded by at least two-score of sympathetic boys, who cheered them to the echo.

## CHAPTER VI.

### TOM FOLEY GETS "HUNK."

As soon as Ben and Tom could tear themselves away from their enthusiastic schoolfellows, they started home together.

"Ben, I'm goin to get hunk with that old reprobate," Tom declared, earnestly.

"Who?"

"Who?" Foley echoed, in amazement. "Why, Deacon Bumpus, of course."

"I think we have come out of it so well that we can afford to let him alone," Ben replied. "It won't do any harm to show that we can be generous and forgiving."

"Forgiving nothing!" Tom echoed, indignantly. "I tell you, I mean to get hunk with him. And I know a good way to do it."

"How?"

"Why, you and I, Ben, will lay ourselves out to find what it was that made him take such a big interest in you when you were a baby. Depend upon it, old fellow, that you'll find something

in it to enable us both to get square with Deacon Moses Bumpus. If he didn't want to cover up some of his wrongdoing, you can be sure he'd never have paid so much money to have you taken care of."

"That's the way it looks to me," Ben answered. "Still, I don't mean to go into this investigation in the hope of securing revenge. I shouldn't deserve to succeed if I did, for revenge isn't a very noble thing. If the deacon would tell me the whole truth about my origin, I'd agree to let revenge alone."

"He tell the truth!" Tom cried, scornfully.

"Oh, yes," Ben went on, argumentatively. "I believe Deacon Bumpus is a truthful man. He is close, I know, and apt to be hard, but I can't believe him to be a full-fledged hypocrite."

"That's where you and I differ," Foley retorted, indignantly. "If the deacon's done nothing wrong, what makes you imagine that he knows your secret, and yet doesn't tell it?"

"It may be that he is trying to shield some one else," Ben responded, thoughtfully.

"That's all rot," Tom cried, impatiently.

"Time will show," was all Ben could say to this. "At all events, as long as I live, I shall never cease my efforts to unravel the tangled skein of my origin."

When Ben entered the house, he found that Mrs. Spencer had arrived home before him.

"Well, mother, I know you are glad to see me safe out of trouble."

"Indeed I am, my boy, and still more pleased to know that you were not at all at fault."

The vegetable garden back of the house needed attending to, and Ben went to work as promptly as though he had not just passed through a—to him—very exciting episode.

In a day or two, the little flutter of excitement caused by the boys' scrape had died out in Wadeville, and things went on as before.

The most surprising fact of all, however, was that Deacon Bumpus appeared to desire to forget all that had happened.

He met Ben and Tom on the street one day, and stopped and held out his hand to them.

"Well, boys, I hope there's no hard feelin' atween us?"

"Tain't likely there is," was Foley's sarcastic reply. "You didn't do nothin' to us, except to try to send us to jail."

"I'm a member of the board of selectmen," the old man replied, "an' of course I have to do my best to see that the laws are obeyed."

"It isn't necessary to say anything more about it," Ben said, coldly. "It's all in the past now."

"An' let it stay there, an' be forgotten," the deacon urged, persuasively. "It may be that I was wrong, an' too quick, an' it's my duty now to see that there ain't no hard feelin's. Let's shake hands, an' forget it."

This seemed a fair proposition, and was evidently sincere.

Ben was prompt to accept the proffered hand.

"Very well, deacon; there's my hand on it."

Tom was in honor bound to follow his chum and leader, and he did so, though, it must be confessed, with a very poor grace.

"And now things is all made up atween us," continued Deacon Bumpus, "come up to the store Saturday night, and work for me as usual; I'll give ye each ten cents an hour."

"Very well," replied Ben, promptly.

And Tom, too, gave a rather reluctant consent.

Deacon Bumpus walked off with a beaming face, as if he felt that he had made honorable amends, and was now at peace with the whole world.

"I wonder what his game is?" Tom muttered, gazing after the old man.

"Oh, I imagine he felt a little ashamed, and wanted to do the right thing," Ben answered.

"I'll bet that ain't the whole of it."

The explanation of the affair was very simple.

Deacon Bumpus had found that so many people in the village sided with the boys, and against him, that in order to preserve all his trade at the store, he felt it best for his pocket that he should prove a reconciliation by employing our friends Saturday evenings.

So, when Saturday evening came around, the boys presented themselves at the store.

The deacon led them into the office, with many groans, and showed them a two-dollar bill.

"Boys, I want ye to be mighty careful to-night. There's lots o' counterfeit bills goin' 'round, an' I don't want ye to take any. This here is a counterfeit two-dollar bill, an' I can't recollect who gave it to me. I've got a list o' counterfeits pasted on the wall, an' I want ye to read the list over. If ye ain't careful, ye'll be likely to ruin me."

The two boys read the list, which gave descriptions of the latest counterfeits, and then went to work.

Later in the evening, both boys happened to be in the office at the same time, for the purpose of making change, for the deacon steadfastly refused to put a money drawer under the counter outside.

Deacon Bumpus came in, too, with a five-dollar bill, which he carefully compared with the printed list of counterfeits.

"I thought so," he muttered; "here's another counterfeit."

"Who gave it to you?" Ben asked.

"Some travelin' feller I never saw before. His buggy's outside. He bought a three-dollar box of cigars, an' he's waitin' for his change, but he'll have ter give me better money than this."

"I'll tell you how to teach him a lesson, deacon," Tom Foley whispered, eagerly. "Just keep the bad bill, and say nothing about it, but give him the bad two-dollar bill in change. That'll teach him he can't play smart tricks upon you, if you do live in the country."

The idea appeared so good that Deacon Bumpus hesitated not a moment. Throwing down the five-dollar bill, he picked up the two-dollar counterfeit and hurried out into the store.

The unknown customer pocketed the bill, took the box of cigars, and drove off.

And then, too late, it all dawned upon the deacon.

"Ye young imp o' Satan!" he hissed, rushing back into the office, "ye've robbed me!"

"How?" Tom demanded, innocently, though he was nearly choking with suppressed laughter.

"Ye got me to give thet feller the bad two for the bad five."

"Well, that's all right, ain't it? You both got bad money out of the deal, so neither's ahead."

"But he's got the cigars—I never thought o' thet," groaned Deacon Bumpus.

"That's so—it is too bad," Tom admitted.

"I'll take thet three dollars out o' your pay," growled the old man. "Thet'll sarve ye right for bein' so stupid."

"But you were just as stupid as I was," Tom retorted. "You didn't see it, either, until the fellow had driven off. You needn't think you're going to take it out of my pay."

"But I will," snarled Bumpus. "Ye'll work fer me fer nothing until thet three dollars is paid back."

"See here," Tom suggested, "let's submit this question to the men sitting on the veranda. I'll go by what they say."

"Of course," Ben put in, gravely, "you were really guilty of felony in knowingly passing a counterfeit bill."

"Well, do I have to make up the three dollars?" Tom demanded.

"I'll have ter let ye off this time," groaned the deacon, who in fancy saw State's prison looming up before him in case he provoked the boys into telling what they knew of the matter.

"I'm hunk with the old codger now," Tom whispered to Ben, as the deacon shuffled out.

## CHAPTER VII.

DEACON BUMPUS STOOPS TO SIN, AND SUFFERS THE CONSEQUENCES.

All Wadeville was at the country horse show early in the week following.

It was an event of such importance that even Deacon Moses Bumpus hitched one of his sorry plugs into the antique carryall, and drove himself and his housekeeper over to the grounds in style.

Judson Foley was there. As a blacksmith, he wanted to show the horsemen of that section some of his own ideas about shoeing horses.

And Tom Foley went everywhere that his father did on such occasions. Mrs. Foley had invited Mrs. Spencer to go with them, and, as a matter of course, Ben went, too.

Farmer Paul got into his sulky and drove his gray mare, which was currently believed to be the most rapid piece of horseflesh in or near Wadeville. Two colts which he had raised with great care were among the exhibits.

To Deacon Bumpus there was an unpleasant feature at the outset—there was a charge of a dollar for the admittance of himself and Miss Marston.

For a few moments he hesitated, and debated in his own mind the expediency of driving home, but the eyes of his neighbors were upon him, and pride gained the victory over avarice.

"Peanuts, popcorn and candy!"

"Consult the witch of Ethiopia, and have your true fortune told, for ten cents!"

"This way to see the five-legged calf! Only a nickel for admittance!"

"Smith & Waldron's Punch and Judy and royal marionettes! Only ten cents to go in the tent and see the whole show! It will begin in five minutes!"

These and other alluring announcements greeted the ears of the newcomers, and caused every boyish heart to palpitate with joy and longing.

Ben and Tom had twenty-five cents each to spend. They pooled issues, and began at once to plan the best way to get rid of their surplus wealth.

"We've got to see that calf, and we can't miss the Punch and Judy," Tom began, "but thunder! that takes thirty cents at a lick. Oh, dear! I wish I was a rich man. I'd see that every boy here had a good time."

"I see several rich men here," Ben suggested, smilingly.

"They won't do us any good," returned Tom, dolefully.

"There's Deacon Bumpus, for instance. He's got lots of money."

"Small good that'll do us," muttered Foley. "But, say, don't you s'pose we could strike him for some coin, and take it out in working for him?"

Ben shook his head.

"I don't like that plan, Tom. It don't do to spend your money before you've earned it."

"That's a good notion, boys. Stick to it!"

The boys started, and turning, saw broad Farmer Paul smiling at them.

"I ain't as rich as the deacon, boys, but if ye spend all your money, an' ain't seen all the sights, jest come to me, an' I'll put ye through an' welcome."

And then the big-hearted old bachelor moved away, to escape the boys' heartfelt thanks.

With this fine prospect ahead, Tom Foley immediately began to plan to see everything upon the grounds, but Ben interrupted him.

"It won't do, Tom, to impose upon good nature. We'll do all that we can upon our own money, and then, perhaps, we'll get Mr. Paul to buy us our Punch and Judy tickets. He's very good to do that much."

"He's a brick!" Tom answered, enthusiastically. "Hello! here's Jake. Wonder if he's got any money to spend?"

Jake was a man of about forty, a simple-minded fellow, who worked here and there about Wadeville.

He was looked upon as an idiot, but the boys who knew him never jeered at him, as boys are wont to do with weak-minded unfortunates, for Jake was industrious, and always willing to share his last dime with any of the boys.

Jake's face, as he came up, was a picture of childish enthusiasm.

"Heaps to see to-day," he cried, joyfully. "And Jake's got the money to see it, too," exhibiting a few dollars. "Stick to Jake, boys, and he'll put you through, you bet."

But both of the boys declined with thanks. They wanted no hand in squandering the scanty stock of money which Jake worked so hard to earn.

Jake moved off, plainly disappointed at their refusal, but he had no difficulty in obtaining a large and devoted following of impecunious boys.

"Well, boys, I hope you're having a good time."

It was Dr. Ezra Todd, the bluff, hearty, old physician of Wadeville, who spoke, and he went on:

"I've got two running horses, you know, boys, and I want you two youngsters to ride them in this afternoon's race. I'll pay five dollars to the one who brings one of my animals in first, and two-fifty for second money. If you don't either of you get first or second place for a horse of mine, then neither of you gets a solitary cent."

"We'll accept the terms," Ben replied, and the doctor moved off.

The man of medicine was well known in Wadeville as a crank on horses, and there was a good likelihood that his latest accession would lead all comers at the day's running races.

Ben and Tom wandered about the grounds until they came to an out-of-the-way nook, where a flashily-dressed young man stood back of a small, light table.

"Here ye go, boys," he said. "Here's yer chance to bet on the wonderful loops. Biggest thing out, and simplest in the world. Show ye how it goes."

The fellow had a strap fastened at both ends in such a way as to form a loop at each end.

He laid the strap so that the two sides lay parallel; then, taking one end of the loop in his fingers, he dexterously brought it across the two parallel sides and made two loops.

"Now, boys, here's yer chance to guess," the fellow went on, glibly. "Ye see, there's two loops. Stick yer finger in one, and it'll hold when I pull this end. Stick yer finger in the other, and it won't. Now, the game is to stick yer finger in the one that will hold."

Ben quietly put his finger in one of the loops, the fellow pulled, and Ben's loop held.

"Yer a smart one," the flashy fellow declared, approvingly. "Now, try it again."

A few rapid moves, and the loops were laid again.

"Now, choose once more," urged the fellow. "I'll bet ye a dollar ye can't guess right this time."

"I haven't got the money," Ben replied.

"Well, then, make the bet fifty cents. Ye're a smart lad, and ye can't make money easier'n that."

"Thank you," Ben replied, quietly. "I don't believe I'll bet. You've fixed it so that neither of the loops will hold this time. It's an old confidence swindle. I read all about it in a newspaper a few weeks ago."

The confidence sharper looked mad.

"See here, kid," he growled, "if ye was onter me, why didn't ye say so?"

"I thought you wanted to amuse me," Ben retorted.

"Oh, come off, kid. Come, now, get a move on ye. Ye'll queer my business if ye stand here."

Deacon Bumpus, who was moving about the grounds without spending a cent for any of the attractions, now came into sight.

"Ben," whispered Tom, "if you love me, don't say a word now."

And, raising his voice, he called out:

"Deacon, have you seen this puzzle? Greatest thing out!"

The flashy young man "sized up" the newcomer quietly.

He deftly arranged the loops, and invited the deacon to put his finger in the right one.

Deacon Bumpus studied the matter a moment, and then put his finger down.

The loop held.

Then the confidence man played his victim so well that the deacon, after first looking to see that there was no one in sight, agreed to a wager of five dollars.

To the amazement of the boys, he won.

"Ye're too sharp, mister," groaned the confidence man. "I don't care about playing this game against you."

But the deacon, elated at his success, insisted upon a bet of ten dollars.

This time he lost.

His defeat caused beads of perspiration to stand out all over his face. In desperation, he offered to wager twenty dollars.

This time, too, he lost.

"Holy smoke!" he roared, "I've lost twenty-five dollars on yer gummed old puzzle."

"Try another bet," urged the fellow. "Ye may get it back, an' more, too."

"I can't; I've lost all I had about me already on yer sinful puzzle, young man. I believe ye're a swindler."

"Come, cully, no hard names, now. A sport mustn't kick when he loses."

The glare which the deacon gave the flashy young man would have annihilated him if a look could kill.

"This thing's called the strap game," Tom volunteered.

"It's rightly named," groaned the deacon. "It's strapped me, an' I believe ye was leagued with this swindler agin' me. I'll tell yer father on ye, ye young scalawag."

"Do," mocked Tom. "Go tell him, and every one else you know, that you've been gambling!"

The implied threat terrified the deacon.

"Tom Foley," he groaned, "if ye'll keep still about these here doings, I'll promise ye not to tell yer father, an' you an' Ben can

keep the gun for another week, an' I'll give ye some more powder an' shot."

"That's a whack," Tom replied, gravely, and the deacon wandered off, in a deep agony over the loss of the money he had gambled away.

"Here, kid," said the flashy young man, "here's a dollar."

"What for?" Tom demanded.

"Fer helpin' me ter rope in the old sucker."

"Keep your money!" Tom retorted, indignantly. "I did that for revenge; but I'm no sharper myself, and I don't want your money."

The boys wandered off again in search of other pastime.

Ben felt ashamed at the way they had permitted the deacon to be robbed by the sharper, but Tom Foley stoutly declared that it "served the old codger good and right."

In the afternoon, among the other events, the running races came off.

Our two young friends rode Dr. Todd's horses.

There were eighteen horses entered for the event, and the doctor's animals were by no means the favorites.

But Ben and Tom rode the beasts for all they were worth.

Ben's horse came in first, and he won the promised five dollars.

And the horse Tom Foley rode came in second, winning for that youngster the promised reward of two-fifty.

"This has been a good day for us," remarked Ben, as they rode home in the evening in Judson Foley's family carriage. "I wouldn't mind going to a horse show every day, if we could do as well as we've done to-day."

"But if old Deacon Bunpus went every day, and didn't have better luck," whispered Tom, laughingly, "he'd soon die of mortification."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A COSTLY NAP FOR THE DEACON.

As there was nothing else to do that week, you may depend upon it that our two young friends made the most of the deacon's gun.

For once, despite his recent loss, the old man seemed inclined to be generous. He did not haggle over the amount of ammunition, but gave them all they could reasonably expect to use.

Every day through the week the two boys went gunning, and with very good luck.

On Saturday, the last day they were to have the gun, the boys shot five good-sized rabbits.

"You can have two, and I'll have two," Ben remarked, as they wandered their way homeward from the hunt. "As for the other rabbit, I think that ought to go to the deacon, as a little compliment in return for his gun."

"What!" shouted Tom, "throw away a rabbit on him!"

"Why, yes," Ben argued, "I think we ought to do it. Remember how much powder and shot he gave us to use."

"Small credit to him," Tom retorted. "What else could he do? Didn't he want to stop our mouths so tight that we wouldn't tell any one about the way he gambled away his money? Just think what the people of this town would say if they knew that one of their deacons had gambled away twenty-five dollars!"

"Why, they'd court-martial him at a special parish meeting, and the old man would have to flee for his life. They'd shun him the way Cain was shunned."

Ben Spencer laughed heartily at the picture conjured up by Tom Foley's fervid imagination.

"Still, Tom," he argued, seriously, "I can't help feeling ashamed of the way that we helped a sharper to fleece him. Taking the

gun this week for keeping still was a good deal like taking black-mail for our silence."

"Pshaw!" rejoined Tom, contemptuously. "After the mean tricks the deacon's played us, I mean to lay awake nights thinking up ways to get hunk on him."

"Let us, at least," Ben persisted, "get even with him by paying him back in kind. If we don't play any worse tricks on him than he played on us, we're even, and some day he'll realize that we are like dynamite—dangerous to handle."

It will be seen that Ben Spencer had not yet forgiven the deacon for causing their arrest and incarceration in the lock-up a fortnight before.

But he wanted to "get even" in a way that appealed to his strong sense of manliness.

"I think we'd better give him the odd rabbit when we take the gun back to-morrow," Ben persisted.

"Well, I s'pose you'll have your way about it," muttered Tom. "You generally do have your way, in the long run."

Deacon Moses Bumpus attended church, according to his unvarying custom, the next morning.

But a most unusual thing happened.

While Parson Elkins was in the midst of a very long prayer, the deacon began to feel ill.

It came over him gradually, and he was intensely astonished.

However, it was nothing serious—nothing more than a very aggravating nausea.

"It's mighty cur'us," groaned the old man, inwardly. "I ain't never been taken this way sence the time I was foolish enough to go out in that steamer the day the water was rough. I declare to goodness, if I don't feel as if I was a-goin' to be seasick on dry land. Oh, Lord!"

He was wholly unequal to the task of following the words of the good old parson's prayer.

That terrible nausea was an all-absorbing topic in itself.

"I feel as if I was a-goin' to die," he groaned once more to himself.

It seemed to him as if Parson Elkins' prayer would never end, for, though Deacon Bumpus resolved that he must leave the church, he did not dare to scandalize them all by going out during the prayer.

And so he sat there, holding his hands to his abdomen, a picture of mute agony.

At last the long-awaited-for "Amen" came.

The deacon fished under the seat for his hat, got it, and then walked out, slowly and with as much dignity as he could summon.

He walked down the road, and gradually began to feel better under the revivifying effect of the sun and fresh air.

At last he came to a spot so cool and shady that he accepted nature's silent invitation to seat himself.

With his back against a tree, he closed his eyes.

The heat of the day and the drowsy hum of the insects did the rest.

In less than three minutes he was sound asleep, and snoring with a vigor that must have startled the field insects.

And so he slept on for an hour, with no signs of an awakening.

And here he was found by Ben Spencer and Tom Foley, when they passed by on their way to leave the gun and the rabbit at his house.

"Well, there's the deacon," cried Tom. "Wonder what he's doing out of church Sunday morning. Sound asleep as a log, too."

"Sh!" whispered Ben. "Don't wake him!"

"Might as well," returned Tom; "then we can give him his gun. He can carry it home as well as we can."

And Tom moved forward to carry out this plan, but Ben seized him by the arm, and whispered:

"Hold on, Tom; here's a chance to thoroughly square our accounts with the deacon."

This announcement rendered Tom Foley as pliant as could have been desired.

"How?" he demanded, eagerly.

"Well," Ben replied, so full of his scheme that he could hardly speak, "the deacon had us arrested for shooting a rabbit on Sunday. Now, he evidently hasn't been to church, which will be let out in a few minutes, and if the people come along here and find him asleep, with a gun and a rabbit by his side, it'll be a clear case against him. He——"

But Ben Spencer could say no more for the moment, for the hugeness of the scheme so appealed to him that he was nearly exploding with laughter, which he did his best to stifle.

"Good enough!" howled Tom. "When they come along and find him, he'll be arrested for shooting on Sunday."

And for a few moments the boys were helpless from stifled laughter.

Then they carefully leaned the gun against the very tree that the unconscious deacon sat propped against. When this was accomplished, they laid the telltale rabbit by his side.

The old man snored blissfully on.

The boys were about to withdraw, when Tom's vigilant eyes lighted upon something.

He picked it up, with a stifled exclamation of delight.

It was a bottle more than half full of whiskey.

"Now we'll fix him," muttered Tom.

"How?" queried Ben.

"Why, here's a bottle of whiskey, probably lost by some hired man who was out on a spree last night. I'll sprinkle some on the deacon's clothes, and then, when the folks find him here, they'll not only think he's been hunting on Sunday, but they'll swear he's drunk, into the bargain. Oh, this is huge!"

Tom Foley carefully sprinkled the deacon's clothes with some of the pungent liquor, and put the bottle, containing the remainder, in one of the sleeper's pockets.

And then, feeling almost as if their stifled laughter was likely to prove fatal, our hero and his chum sneaked off into a clump of bushes that commanded a good view of Deacon Bumpus' position, while the deacon continued that sleep which was to prove so dear to him.

The boys, peeping cautiously from their covert, saw the foremost of the crowd from church coming around a bend in the road, right up to the spot where an intense surprise awaited them.

And still Deacon Moses Bumpus slept on!

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE FALL OF BUMPUS.

"What made Deacon Bumpus leave church so early this morning?" inquired Parson Elkins, as the church people were on their way home. "It was something most extraordinary for him to do."

There were a few conjectures expressed, but no one seemed to feel very certain as to the reason.

"Why, there's Brother Bumpus!" exclaimed the Rev. Mr. Elkins, as he came in sight of the spot where the old man sat snoring. "He appears to be either asleep or unconscious. I do trust that our worthy brother is not ill."

"Why, mercy! he has a gun!" cried old Mrs. Riggles. "Now, what can Brother Bumpus be doing with a gun?"

This was too great a poser.

Nobody ventured any explanation of this unlooked-for discovery.

Parson Elkins and half a dozen members of his flock, who were in the lead of the rest, walked slowly up to the spot occupied by the snoring deacon.

Their amazement and dismay were so genuine and so evident that the rest hurried to the scene, and more than a hundred people crowded about the unconscious Bumpus.

The thick, soft carpet of grass so completely deadened the sounds of their footsteps that the sleeper was not awakened.

"Why, mercy me!" exclaimed Miss Sophronia Scott, "do look at that gun and the poor little rabbit. I do believe that Deacon Bumpus has been hunting, and on the Lord's Day, too!"

This impressoin rapidly became current.

Parson Elkins looked very grave, indeed.

"I trust that our brother, the deacon, can amply explain this untoward-looking circumstance," he said, sadly. "I think I will awaken him."

Mrs. Riggles, who had crowded into the foremost ranks of the onlookers, saw fit to interpose.

"Don't ye do it, parson!"

"Why not, Sister Riggles?"

"Mercy! ye don't hev ter ask me that, d'ye?"

And Mrs. Riggles put two thin, sharp fingers over a nose that was also very sharp.

Parson Elkins was more astonished than ever.

"Be good enough to explain what you mean, Sister Riggles."

"Why, goodness sakes alive, parson! ain't ye got no nose?"

The minister regarded the good woman as if he feared she had taken leave of her senses.

"I possess the olfactory organ, Sister Riggles, but I trust you will be good enough to point out what connection there is between that and this grievous circumstance by which we are now confronted."

Mrs. Riggles lost all patience with this painfully obtuse pastor.

"Why, goodness sakes alive, Mr. Elkins," she cried, "if ye've got a nose, jest go an' stand over this sinful old reprobate, who has allus professed to be a good brother o' the church."

"Sister Riggles," expostulated the clergyman, "I trust you are not applying such language to Deacon Bumpus."

"Thet's jest what I'm a-doin', parson, an' if ye'll do as I tell ye, ye'll see what I mean."

The Rev. Mr. Elkins, with a very grave face, indeed, stepped forward and bent over the unconscious deacon.

And all that throng, scenting something even more startling than they had yet perceived, crowded about the spot.

A very brief investigation betrayed to the pastor what had been apparent to Mrs. Riggles' sharper sense of smell at a greater distance.

There were tears in the good old parson's eyes as he turned again to his flock.

"Brethren," he said, in tones that faltered not a little, "for the first time in many years, I fear I have found a deacon who has been unfaithful to his trust. I sincerely hope I am mistaken, but I am almost convinced that our erring brother has not only been hunting on the Sabbath, but has even gone so far as to indulge in strong liquors."

An awed hush fell upon the little flock at this terrible announcement.

Parson Elkins stood over the deacon, slowly shaking his head, as he put on his spectacles to hide the tears that would come to his weak, old eyes.

And then every one commenced to talk at once, in low tones.

"I was mighty cur'us t' know what made the deakin go out when service wa'n't hardly begun," Mrs. Riggles admitted, with the solemn air of one who is imparting a dread secret. "I looked into the deakin's face when he went out, an' I must say, I never saw the deakin look that way before. He was a changed man."

"I saw him, too," chimed in Miss Sophronia Scott. "I'm quite sure now that he staggered when he left the church. His breath smelled strong enough o' liquor to knock a hoss down."

A little cry of horror went up from the assemblage at these damning statements.

It gradually dawned upon many others that they, too, had noticed the extraordinary appearance of Deacon Bumpus when he left the church that morning.

And all of these positive people gradually agreed that they had noticed unmistakable signs of inebriety about the erring brother.

"Even yet I can hardly credit it," protested Parson Elkins, weakly. "It seems incredible to me that a brother who has so long been foremost in good works should so suddenly depart from the paths of rectitude as to forsake the house of worship to go hunting, and then wind up by becoming intoxicated. Brethren, I am more grieved than I can tell you at what I see."

Every one else appeared grieved, too, but after the first spasm of grief was over, one man spoke, and voiced the sentiments of many others:

"When one of our brothers disgraces himself publicly like this, the best thing we can do is to give him a trial before parish meetin', an' then cast him out from our midst. He is no longer worthy to be of us."

"It seems to me," said Parson Elkins, "that if our erring brother is truly penitent, we had far better help him along the straight but narrow path hereafter. If Brother Bumpus becomes truly penitent for this strange conduct, it is our duty to extend the helping hand."

"How the First Methodist people will crow over us when they hear of this," groaned Miss Scott.

And, once more, everybody began to talk at the same time.

The wonder was that Deacon Bumpus had slept so soundly through all the hubbub.

At last he slowly opened his eyes.

Astonished, and even startled, at finding himself the center of such a large group, he opened his mouth as if about to ask the meaning of it all.

But, just at this moment, his eye fell upon his gun, and the rabbit at his side.

Slowly the whole situation dawned upon him.

How that gun and rabbit came there he could not even guess, but he perceived that the onlookers believed him—he, Deacon Bumpus—guilty of hunting on the Sabbath!

And the evidence seemed so conclusive that the deacon's face turned a guilty scarlet, and he stammered hopelessly as soon as he tried to speak.

"Deacon," began Parson Elkins, and the good old man spoke far more sternly than was his wont, "it seems that you have been hunting on the Lord's Day. I trust that at the proper moment you can explain away these unsatisfactory appearances."

Deacon Bumpus bounded to his feet in a rage.

"I ain't been hunting!" he bellowed. "I don't know what ye're all talkin' 'bout, but the man thet says I've been huntin' is a liar!"

"Deacon, deacon!" expostulated the pastor, while Mrs. Riggles sniffed contemptuously, and muttered, aloud:

"He doesn't even know what he's a-sayin'."

And now, for the first time in his excitement, Deacon Bumpus' nasal organ detected the smell of whiskey.

"Some o' you folks are drunk!" he cried. "I kin smell the whiskey on yer breaths."

"That's a drunken man all over!" cried Mrs. Riggles, scornfully, holding up her hands and turning to the rest. "When a man's drunk, he allus accuses everybody else."

The deacon heard this, and became angrier than ever.

"Who dares t' say I'm drunk?" he roared.

"I won't stay here 'nother minute," said Mrs. Riggles, decisively. "I won't have my ears insulted by any drunken man's talk." Her views were shared by many others, who followed her for some distance.

Parson Elkins had been taking in the whole affair in helpless grief.

Now he had laid one kindly hand upon the shoulder of the supposed erring brother, and said:

"Don't say any more, Brother Bumpus, or you may be sorry for it later. I am sure you will be fully penitent when you come to your senses."

"What are all ye lunatics a-drivin' at?" snarled the bewildered old man.

"Say no more, brother; say no more," urged the pastor, soothingly. "Brother Paul and myself will see you safely home."

Before the deacon could protest, the pastor had taken hold of him by one arm, and Farmer Paul the other.

They started along, but the deacon was in anything but a pliant mood.

"You'll wanter sleep off this drunk," commented Mr. Paul.

"Who's drunk?" roared Bumpus, resisting weakly their attempts to lead him.

"Well, deakin, I shu'd say you was," responded the farmer. "See this?"

And Mr. Paul drew from the deacon's side pocket the half-filled bottle of whiskey.

Deacon Bumpus was so bewildered that he couldn't speak for several minutes, during which time he was led toward home.

When Deacon Bumpus did get control of his voice, he tried to protest his failure to comprehend any part of the appearances so damning against him.

He offered to go before a notary public, and make oath that he had not been hunting that day, nor had a single drop of liquor passed between his lips.

But Parson Elkins was mildly incredulous—Farmer Paul broadly so.

In despair, the deacon gave up his pretensions of innocence, though, of course, he did not admit anything.

His guides took him to his house, and left him, after urging him to take to his bed and to keep to it all day.

And all the rest of that Sunday the good people of Wadeville had a scandal of the first water to discuss.

It was generally agreed that Deacon Moses Bumpus must stand trial before a parish meeting, and must be disciplined, although opinions differed as to how severe that discipline ought to be.

As for Ben Spencer and Tom Foley, after witnessing the whole ludicrous affair from their place of concealment, they stole to their homes.

By the following morning, Judson Foley, the blacksmith, who had been doing some deep thinking, called his son.

"Tom, you and Ben Spencer played a joke upon the deacon. You might as well own up."

And, after a few ineffectual protests, Tom did own up.

Judson Foley told the joke to all, and by noon nearly every one in the village knew that the character of Deacon Bumpus had been vindicated, so far as drunkenness and desecration of the Sabbath were concerned.

But nearly every one agreed that the boys had played a richly deserved joke upon the old man.

Deacon Bumpus thus stepped down from the pillory of public disgrace, but for many a day after that he was a butt of ridicule.

And, somehow, the old man forgot one Christian duty—he never forgave the boys for the trick they had played him.

## CHAPTER X.

### FINDING TREASURE TROVE.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, Ben?"

"I don't know, Tom."

"I'm going fishing."

"Then I'll go with you."

The best fishing in Wadeville was found where the creek crossed Farmer Paul's land.

And the farmer never denied any boy the privilege of fishing there, so it was a spot of general resort among anglers.

On this afternoon, however, when the boys arrived there, with their rods, lines and a shovel, they found themselves the only visitors to the spot.

"All of this land's been pretty well dug for bait," said Ben. "Suppose we dig up under that tree?"

"All right. You dig first, Ben, and then I'll take a turn."

Ben dug for several minutes, but his efforts were not rewarded by the discovery of many worms.

So Tom took a turn, with no better success.

Then Spencer seized the shovel once more.

"We are digging a terrible hole," commented Tom. "If Mr. Paul saw us now, he'd think we were trying to sink a mine on his land."

"Hello!" muttered Ben; "what's this?"

Tom was all attention as Ben prodded in the hole with the shovel.

"Only a piece of wood," Tom finally ventured.

"I believe it's a box," Ben replied. "I'm going to dig it up, anyway, whatever it is."

He dug energetically, while Tom Foley thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and watched the work with great interest.

It was a box, and evidently so old and decayed that Ben had to dig with considerable care to avoid breaking it.

At last the soil about it was cleared away, and the boys carefully lifted their mysterious find out of the hole.

Ben started to pry off the lid, but it needed no prying.

With the first stroke or two the box fell to pieces.

The boys uttered a cry of astonishment and delight.

For the box was filled with dingy-looking silver coins!

"Well, we are in luck," muttered Tom Foley, breathlessly.

But Ben Spencer shook his head.

"This doesn't belong to us, Tom."

"Didn't we find it, Ben Spencer?"

"Yes, but not on our land."

Tom's face fell to a doleful length.

"That's so," he admitted, disconsolately.

"If no other owner appears, this money belongs to Mr. Paul."

"I s'pose it does."

"You go and find Mr. Paul, Tom. I'll stay here and watch the money."

Heedless of the warmth of the day, Tom Foley bounded off.

It was half an hour before he came back.

Farmer Paul accompanied him.

"Well, Ben, Tom tells me you've made a wonderful find."

"Yes, sir."

"How much is there?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't want to touch it until you came."

Farmer Paul seated himself on the ground, and began to sort and count the coins, while the boys looked on with breathless interest.

"There's a hundred an' ninety dollars here," announced Paul, when he had finished counting.

"Do you think the owner can be found?" Ben inquired.

"No, I'll gamble on it he can't. The oldest coin is dated 1808, an' the owner's likely been dead forty years or more. Well, boys, ye're in luck."

"The money belongs to you," Ben replied. "We found it on your land."

"So ye did, Ben; so ye did. But I take it ye don't know the law 'bout hidden treasure."

"I don't know that I do, sir."

"Well, boys, when hidden treasure's found, the law 'lows half to the owner o' the land, an' t'other half goes to the finder."

"Is that really the law?" Ben cried, delighted.

"Thet's the law, my boy, sure's gospel."

And the farmer really seemed more delighted at the boys' good luck than he did at his own.

"I'm a-goin' to 'low you boys an even hundred for good measure," he went on, and divided the money in this manner.

"But suppose we should spend this, and then an owner turned up?" suggested Ben.

"I'll take all the resk on thet," returned Paul. "Them coins are so old thet ye needn't be afraid of meetin' no rightful owner 'cept ourselves."

The boys filled their pockets with their share, and the farmer did the same with his.

"We are very much obliged to you," said Ben, "for being so fair as to tell us what the law is. We supposed it all belonged to you, because we found it upon your land."

"An' I'm much 'bleeged t' ye, boys, for bein' square enough to come an' tell me. I'm afraid some boys would have kept all the money, an' said nothin' 'bout it. But take good care o' your money, boys. Ye oughter each o' ye turn your share into a good pile by the time ye reach twenty-one."

The boys hurried homeward.

Tom Foley talked glibly of all that could be done with his fifty dollars.

Ben was silent at first.

Finally, as they were nearing home, he said:

"Tom, do you know, I've been thinking a good deal about what Mr. Paul said to us. You had better give up your notions of spending your money, anyway, for your father is too sensible a man to allow you to spend fifty dollars outright."

"Now between us, we have one hundred dollars. Don't you think, Tom, that we could invest that amount of capital in some way that would enable us to make considerable money?"

"I'd rather have a bicycle," rejoined Tom.

"But see here, Tom, when we get through school, we shall neither of us have a dollar to start in the world with, unless we contrive to earn and save while we are in school. I tell you, Tom, a fellow can start a great deal better in the world when he has some money to do it with."

"You're getting to be as bad as the deacon about money," growled Tom.

"Well, here's my gate. I'm going in to tell mother the news. I'll come over after supper, and we'll talk over this matter."

Mrs. Spencer was, of course, delighted at Ben's luck.

"But what will you do with so much money, my boy?" she inquired.

"I have been thinking of that, mother. I think, if Tom will go

in with me, that he and I can invest the money in some business that will enable us to earn more money. I should like to talk it over after supper with Mr. Foley. He's a man of good judgment in matters of business, and I think his advice would be worth something to us."

Mrs. Spencer, delighted to see that her boy appreciated the advice of his elders, readily assented to this. After supper they walked over to the Foleys', who were near neighbors.

"Good-evenin', Mrs. Spencer," said the blacksmith; "good-evenin', Ben. Tom's been telling me about the luck you two youngsters had to-day. Tom has already proposed to me twenty different ways of spendin' the money, an' I haven't said 'yes' to any of them."

"Are you willing, Tom, to go into a business scheme with me?" Ben asked.

"'Spose I might as well," Tom replied, disconsolately. "Pop won't let me spend the money any way I want to."

"I don't mean to encourage him in squandering it, even if it is his money," the blacksmith replied, gravely. "But let's hear of your scheme, Ben."

"It is this," Ben answered; "I thought that Tom and myself might succeed in buying a horse and cart for one hundred dollars. My idea was for Tom and myself to start an express business."

"I don't see that there is any demand for that kind of a business in this village," Judson Foley objected, thoughtfully.

"Not here—no, sir; but Rutledge, the nearest big town, is eighteen miles away. It is so far that people who have only small quantities of produce to sell are obliged to sell it to Deacon Bumpus, who pays very poor prices."

"Now, I think Tom and I could cart the produce to Rutledge and sell it on commission, so that we would make enough to pay for our trouble, and at the same time the people of Wadeville would realize better prices than if they sold to the deacon."

"On the return trip, we could bring groceries, or provisions, or anything else that the people here are now buying at the deacon's store. As he has the only store here, his charges are very high. On such stuff as we buy for our customers, we will charge a regular express tariff on each package."

"Thus the people of Wadeville, by patronizing our express line, would be able to both buy and sell to better advantage than they can do at present. And we can start at first by running three trips a week."

"But in a few weeks," interjected Mr. Foley, "school will open, and then you can't spare the time."

"I have thought of that," Ben replied. "But by fall there won't be much farm produce to go to town, and I think we can make one trip a week do. We can go on Saturdays then."

Judson Foley asked several questions, and raised many objections, but in the end he expressed approval of the scheme.

"Bill Hawkins has a fairly good horse and wagon that I think he'll sell you for a hundred," Mr. Foley announced. "I'll see him in the morning, and see what he says."

"Tom, do you want to go in this plan with me?" Ben asked.

"Yes, I'm ready. It's a daisy, and we'll make money. After all, a bicycle wouldn't bring me any money."

Hawkins was finally persuaded to part with the horse and wagon in question for a hundred dollars.

The two boys canvassed the village for customers, in which they were ably assisted by Tom's father.

Ben's scheme for an express line created quite a stir in Wadeville.

There were plenty of people who were tired of the deacon's penurious ways of doing business, and these consented to give the boys a trial.

Early one morning, Ben and Tom drove out of Wadeville, with a big load of produce on the wagon, and orders for a considerable quantity of goods to be bought at Rutledge for their customers.

## CHAPTER XI.

### AN ATTEMPT AT A "DICKER."

"It's a-comin' to that—it's a-comin' to that."

Moses Bumpus shook his head sadly as he gave expression to this prophetic utterance.

He was alone in his store. In fact, he was alone a good deal nowadays.

The new express line had carried all the cash trade away from his once prosperous store.

Still, Deacon Bumpus was hardly to be pitied.

So far, he had steadfastly refused to acknowledge competition and meet it. He had had his own way so long that he could not change all at once.

And the deacon was not a poor man.

While people in Wadeville could make only the vaguest estimate of the extent of his worldly possessions, it was known to all that he was a very "forehanded" man, who could retire from work at any time when he wished.

But that was not the old man's way.

Like most other people who have been reared to unceasing hard work, he knew no other pleasures, could understand no other existence.

As long as he retained his bodily health, he could be depended upon to keep at work, striving to add more to the wealth that already far exceeded his needs.

"Those boys'll ruin me," he groaned.

The deacon lit his corncob pipe, and sat down in his deserted store to think.

Not pleasant thoughts, certainly, for his face took on a scowling aspect.

While he was thinking thus, he heard two boys whistling outside.

"Thet's them, I'll bet," he muttered, and moved toward the door.

As he supposed, the two whistlers were Ben Spencer and Tom Foley.

"Might as well say it now as any time, an' have it over with," the deacon muttered to himself.

And raising his voice, he called:

"I say, boys, come in here, won't ye?"

And, as if sure that his request would be obeyed, he turned at once and walked back to his chair.

"What does that old codger want of us?" Tom wondered.

"Can't say, I'm sure," Ben returned.

"Let's give him the go-by," Tom proposed.

But Ben dissented.

"If the deacon wants to say something to us, it's no more than fair to give him a chance. Come on, Tom."

So the boys entered the store together.

"Warm day, boys," was the deacon's greeting.

"Rather," Ben assented, languidly.

The boys helped themselves to seats.

"Ye ain't drivin' t' town to-day?" the deacon queried.

"No; to-morrow's our day."

"Thet hoss o' yourn is gettin' terrible thin, Ben Spencer."

"Yes. You know, deacon, the round trip to Rutledge is thirty-six miles, and a good deal of the road is so bad that it makes the trip really as bad as fifty miles would be on a good, level road. That's why so few farmers around here drive their own stuff to market. It would wear their horses out more than they could afford."

"Yet ye seem willin' t' wear your hoss out," Bumpus objected.

"We have to, just now, to carry on the business," Ben answered. "By the time school opens there won't be so much business, and I guess we can make one trip a week do. But the business pays first-rate in the summer, and by next May I think we can afford to buy another horse, and run a double team."

The deacon groaned inwardly at this plan for extending the express business.

"The society with the long name is apt to git after ye, boys. Ye're abusin' thet poor hoss, makin' him haul sech loads three times a week."

The deacon's tone implied a threat, but Ben Spencer was not dismayed.

Then there was an interval of silence. Deacon Bumpus hardly knew how to begin what he wanted to say now.

At length he resumed:

"Ye reely oughter sell thet hoss, boys, afore ye kill him. For the sake o' seemin' the poor beast have lighter work, mebber I'd be willin' t' buy him."

"If you want to trade," Ben answered, readily, "it may be that we can strike a bargain."

This was just what the old man wanted.

"Well, boys, if ye wanter sell, mebber I'd give ye seventy-five dollars for the hoss an' cart."

"But we paid a hundred for the rig."

"Mebber ye did, but ye've used thet hoss up a heap, I tell ye, an' he ain't wuth as much as he was. Seventy-five is the best I'd offer ye."

"Then it isn't worth while to talk about it. We couldn't make a trade at that price," Ben responded.

The deacon smoked a while in silence.

"Mebber I could give ye eighty," he said, at length.

"No, sir."

"Make it eighty-five, then," urged the deacon. "Thet's a liberal price."

"I don't see it, deacon."

After several minutes of apparently indifferent talk on both sides, Deacon Bumpus' offer reached the hundred mark.

"An' thet's doin' mighty well by ye, boys, for thet's all ye gave for the critter, an' ye've used him tarnation hard."

But Ben only shook his head.

Then the haggling went on, but it was one-sided, for the boys betrayed no anxiety to sell.

And so, by slow stages, a few dollars at a time, the deacon increased his offer, at the end of another half hour, to one hundred and twenty-five dollars.

But a firm "no" was all he got from Ben.

At that price the deacon stuck fast.

Our hero made no offer to urge the old man on.

"I'll see you later, deacon," Ben said at last, rising.

And Tom arose, too.

"Hold on, boys," said the deacon, hastily, and they sat down again.

"I'll go five dollars better, an' make it a hundred an' thutty," Deacon Bumpus said, desperately.

"It's no use, deacon; we're not anxious to sell."

"S'pose I say a hundred an' thutty-five."

"No, sir."

The deacon smoked and reflected for a while, with a perturbed countenance.

"A hundred an' forty cash is tip top highest price," he finally announced.

"See here, deacon," Ben responded, promptly, "if you want to give a hundred and fifty, we'll sell. Though honestly, I think you would be paying more than our rig's worth. But I know of a better horse and wagon in Rutledge that we can buy for a hundred and fifty, so I'll sell at that price, if you really want to buy."

"See here, Ben Spencer, if I buy yer hoss'n cart, it must be on a promise that there is to be no more express business."

"Of, if you wanted to buy out our business, why didn't you say so?" our hero rejoined, calmly.

"Don't beat about the bush," retorted the deacon. "Of course, it was understood that the business went with the rig."

"We didn't understand it so," Ben replied.

"Well, boys, what's yer figger t'sell outright, business an' all?" Ben looked inquiringly at his chum. Tom Foley nodded.

"Go ahead, Ben, I'll stand by whatever you say."

"Well, deacon," Ben went on, deliberately, "here are our terms: for the horse and cart, the same price we paid for it—a hundred. For the good will of the business, three hundred more, making four hundred in all."

The deacon so far forgot himself as to jump up and throw his pipe violently behind the counter.

"What!" he gasped. "Four hundred! Boys, are ye crazy?"

"Not at all."

"I won't pay it," roared the deacon, turning purple in the face.

"Very well, we're not anxious to sell. We're clearing over seventy-five dollars a month."

"Ben Spencer," roared Bumpus, "ye're gittin' a leetle too big fer yer pants."

Our hero made no response to this vulgar taunt. "Boys, listen to me," the deacon went on, angrily. "I'll buy ye out, business an' all, for two hundred."

"The offer is respectfully declined."

"Then, Ben Spencer an' Tom Foley, I'll settle ye 'nother way. Beginnin' with to-day, I'll put my prices lower'n you, if I have to sell below cost. Then ye'll lose all your customers in a mighty short time. I'll show ye what the competition o' capital can do."

And the old man glared triumphantly at them, expecting to see the boys wilt under this threat.

"Competition's the life of business, deacon," said Tom Foley, demurely, rising and sauntering out.

Ben still kept his seat, however, and the deacon seated himself, staring at the floor in sulky silence.

Ben Spencer was silent a long time. At last he gazed at the deacon intently, and asked:

"Who am I, Deacon Bumpus? You surely know who my father and mother were."

Was it imagination, or did Deacon Bumpus really turn pale?

"I don't know nothin'," he answered, testily. "I know how I found ye, a brat in a basket, on my doorstep."

"Then why did you pay two hundred and fifty to have me adopted?"

"Jest kind-heartedness, an' now I'm sorry I didn't let you go t' the workhouse."

Ben saw the deacon would tell him nothing, and he went out, whistling a popular air that was then all the vogue, "Oh, What a Liar!"

But Deacon Bumpus knew nothing of popular airs.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE LONE HIGHWAYMAN.

Deacon Bumpus was as good as his word.

He took a hurried inventory of his stock, and marked all the prices down to astonishingly low figures.

That same evening he displayed a sign outside the store which read:

"ACTUALLY SELLING BELOW COST."

Such an announcement could be depended upon to draw investigation on the part of the Wadeville people.

When they went into the store they found that Deacon Bumpus was really doing all he advertised.

"An' I'll buy produce at Rutledge figures of all who buy their goods of me," he announced.

"Tryin' to run Spencer and Foley outter the business, eh?" queried one customer.

"There ain't trade enough in this village for two," the deacon replied. "Competition is the life o' business, an' I mean ter have all there is goin' here."

"An' ye'll be apt t' git it, too, deakin, if ye keep yer prices where they are now."

The astonishing news that Deacon Bumpus was really selling below the price at which the boys could buy soon had the desired effect.

People can be depended upon to buy where they can buy cheapest, and Ben and Tom found their former patrons rapidly deserting them.

"The deacon's working against us for all he's worth," Tom muttered.

"Yes," Ben replied. "It looks as if he's got over two-thirds of our business away from us. But we can go on making small pay for the present. The deacon may get discouraged, selling at a loss, and then our chances will be improved again."

But as the boys continued to do what business they could get for their express line, the deacon continued to sell at ruinous prices.

"With all the money I've got, I guess I can hold out longer'n two boys who ain't got no capital," he mused, grimly.

About this time there came a scare in Wadeville.

A lone highwayman was about, a desperate fellow who took big chances to get a little money.

Farmer Paul was the first to meet him.

"The feller held me right up at the point of a pistol," he explained at the village. "I saw there wa'n't no chance to make a fight, so I had t' climb down off th' wagon an' let the feller take my pocketbook."

"Anything in it?" queried a sympathetic bystander.

"Forty dollars."

"Whew!"

"That settles it," muttered Hank Sibley. "When I'm drivin' after dark, I'm goin' to have a pistol on the seat beside me."

The very next night Sibley met the highwayman.

"He didn't give me no show at all," Hank said, gloomily, in recounting his experience at the village store. "Fore I knew there was any one around, he had his hand on my hoss' bridle, an' had a pistol pointed straight at my head. If I'd tried t' shoot, he'd filled me up with lead, so I had t' climb down off the seat, an' he got \$3.40 an' a watch I paid six dollars for."

"And the pistol?" inquired Farmer Paul.

"He got that, too," Hank answered, with an indescribable pathos in his tone.

And on still the next night another farmer was "held up" on still another road by the same daring highwayman.

The consequence was that the people of the village began to be afraid of going upon the outlying roads after dark.

The highwayman became the one absorbing topic in Wadeville.

Various plans were discussed for entrapping the daring fellow, but no one seemed particularly anxious to make that risky experiment.

"Boys, ye wanter be keerful," said Farmer Paul, as he was helping the boys to load his produce on to the wagon one mornin', for the farmer was still among the boys' customers.

"Do you mean the highwayman?" Ben inquired.

"Yes, ye wanter look out thet ye don't meet him when ye're comin' home to-night."

"A pleasant prospect," commented Tom, grimly.

"Well, that feller ain't likely t' hurt if ye give in," Mr. Paul went on. "But it'd be too bad if the feller made ye give up the money ye'd got for the sales o' produce."

"We don't have so much money about us now," Ben answered. "The deacon's cut in prices has taken nearly all our trade from us."

"Still ye don't wanter lose what money ye may have 'bout ye," the farmer persisted.

"No, certainly not. We will keep our eyes open for the highwayman."

"Ye carry some kind of a firearm, I s'pose?" said Paul.

Ben shook his head.

"No; I shouldn't want to shoot the poor devil, anyway. My dog Rover has always gone with us before, and he's better than a pistol; but Rover's sick, and I've had to leave him at home."

"I can let ye take a pistol," said Paul.

"Thank you, but I don't believe I will."

"Better take it," urged Paul. "Ye can't tell but what the feller has already got ye marked. Ye may meet him to-night when ye're comin' home."

"And then he'd get the pistol as well as our money," laughed Ben. "You remember what happened to Hank Sibley."

And so, again thanking the farmer, Ben and Tom drove off.

"It seems to me, Tom, that our load's getting lighter every trip we make. Our whole profit to-day won't amount to a dollar."

"The deacon's fighting us hard," Tom commented, "but I don't want to give in and stop our business."

"Nor I, either," Ben rejoined. "We've got enough money saved now to board the horse all winter, so, the Lord willing, we'll make our trips all through the winter, even if we don't make a cent. You can be sure that Deacon Bumpus will have to put a stop, sooner or later, to his present low prices. Then our turn will come again."

Both boys were full of determination not to be driven out of the field by any competitor, least of all by Deacon Bumpus.

When they reached Rutledge, it did not take them long to dispose of what little produce they had to sell.

And, a few minutes after that was done, all their purchases for Wadeville customers had been made.

A merchant named Haight came up to Ben.

"Spencer, do you carry money by your express line?"

"Never have, sir, but we're always willing to enlarge our business. However, you know there's a highwayman doing business up our way."

"I see. Well, of course, if you take the money for me, you'll have to guarantee its safe delivery. Can you make good \$200 in case I intrust that amount to you?"

And the merchant looked searchingly at our hero.

"Yes, sir," Ben answered, promptly. "Between our horse and

wagon and what we have saved up, we could guarantee two hundred dollars."

"I owe that amount to Deacon Bumpus. Will you take it to him, and bring me his receipt on your next trip?"

"Yes, sir; certainly."

"And how much do you want for it?"

"Well, sir, considering the risk, I shall have to charge you a dollar and a half."

"Very well, Spencer, I'll agree to that. Come in and sign a receipt for the money, and be sure that you bring me the deacon's receipt the next time you come to town!"

Ben receipted for the money, and received it.

Shortly after dark, the boys found themselves slowly ascending a long hill about three miles from Wadeville, when a man jumped out from the bushes, covered them with a pistol and commanded them to jump to the ground.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### BEN MAKES A CLEVER CAPTURE.

It all happened so suddenly that, if Ben Spencer had not previously decided upon the course of action to be followed in just such an emergency as the present one, he would have had to get down off the wagon and submit to being robbed of the \$200 which had been intrusted to him.

Tom Foley was already in the road, holding his hands up as high as could be desired.

"Come, youngster," said the highwayman to Ben, "get down lively or I may have to hurt you."

"Please don't shoot me," Ben pleaded, as if badly frightened.

The lone highwayman laughed.

"No knowing what I may have to do," he retorted.

And then, just for an instant, the highwayman was off his guard.

This was the chance Ben wanted.

On the seat beside him was a small paper bag of cayenne pepper which he had bought in Rutledge.

Owing to the dusk, he had managed to insert his hand into the bag unseen.

Now that hand shot out toward the highwayman's head.

The next instant the air seemed full of red pepper.

Full in the eyes the robber received it.

He reeled, threw his hands to his eyes, and fell to the ground shrieking curse after curse.

"You've blinded me!" he yelled.

"I meant to," was the calm rejoinder of Ben Spencer, who had leaped to the ground and picked up the pistol which the robber had dropped.

The latter continued to fill the air with curses and shrieks of agony.

He lay writhing on the ground, rubbing his hands into his eyes in a way that aggravated rather than alleviated his pain.

"I will take you to the brook if you wish," said Ben.

"For Heaven's sake do."

"Get up, then, and take my hand. Tom, come with us."

The suffering footpad did as directed, and Ben led the way to the brook.

"Now, get down on your knees and scoop the water into your eyes. Wash them out as thoroughly as you can."

The poor wretch obeyed, moaning and groaning all the time.

"That was a dirty trick to play on a fellow," he protested, when the pain in his eyes had become a little easier.

"Not half so mean as to kill a human being," Ben retorted. "When you take to highway robbery, you must be prepared for all the risks that go with it. You would willingly have killed me for the sake of robbing me."

"I've a good mind to now," muttered the fellow.

And bringing himself suddenly erect, he made a sudden spring at our hero.

"Stand off!" Ben ordered, holding the fellow's own pistol in his face.

The robber recoiled.

"You wouldn't dare to shoot me," he muttered.

"Wouldn't I?" Ben retorted. "Don't test me."

"Give me that pistol, youngster."

"No, it's mine now."

"Hand it back to me, or you'll be sorry."

Ben laughed.

"You don't appear to understand the situation, Mr. Robber. You are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner?"

This was said with a gasp of incredulity.

"Yes."

"But I won't be taken alive by any man."

"Then we will ship your remains to Wadeville," Ben responded, very calmly. "You are going there, dead or alive. Throw up your hands!"

There was something so stern in our hero's voice that the highwayman obeyed.

"See here, kid, you don't mean this," he protested.

"Oh, yes, I do."

"Let me go, and I'll make it worth your while."

"How?"

"I've got over fifty dollars about me. Let me go, and it is yours."

Ben drew himself up proudly.

"I am not a highwayman! keep your money. You will need it to hire a lawyer."

The fellow, still holding his hands up at the point of the pistol in Ben's hands, pleaded for his liberty, but the young captor was inexorable.

"I am a partner in an express business," Ben assured him, "and I can't afford to take chances of being robbed of money or goods intrusted to me by customers. Tom, go to the wagon and get the halter."

While Tom was gone on this errand, the fellow made more pleas for freedom, but with no better success than before.

"Here's the halter, Ben," said Tom, returning.

"Keep it, Tom."

And then, to the prisoner:

"Lie on your face on the ground, and put your hands behind your back."

This the robber did not do at first, but finally thought better of his refusal when Ben said:

"As sure as you do not before I count ten, I shall shoot you! One, two, three, four, five—"

But the fellow had given in, and Ben was not put to the test whether he would keep his threat.

Then our hero kneeled, and held the pistol to the fellow's head, while Tom Foley deftly tied his wrists with one end of the halter.

They helped him to his feet, and Ben took the other end of the halter in his left hand.

"Now, march on before me," he commanded. "Don't try any tricks, for remember that I have this revolver pointed at your back. Tom, you get upon the wagon, and drive slowly. This gentleman and myself will walk alongside."

The prisoner, finding himself perfectly helpless, walked along as ordered, cursing himself roundly and loudly for ever allowing himself to be taken by a tricky boy.

In this manner they proceeded to Wadeville, which they reached in less than an hour.

"Stop when we get to Farrar's house, Tom," directed Ben.

And so they paused in front of the constable's house.

Tom went to the door, and called out to the constable, who came to the gate highly incredulous.

"Tom Foley tells me a yarn 'bout yer catchin' the highwayman," said the official.

"So we have," Ben replied, "and here he is."

The constable now perceived the prisoner standing there in the darkness, and muttered.

"Well, I'll be durned. Be you the highway feller that's had all our folks 'fraid to drive out after dark?"

"Of course I ain't," growled the prisoner.

"How do you know he is?" Farrar demanded of Ben.

"Because he held us up," laughed the boy. "That's pretty good reason for believing him a highwayman, isn't it? And here's the fellow's pistol that he pointed at our heads."

"That's a likely story," sniffed the constable. "How did you get it away from him?"

Ben narrated the circumstances of the capture, and the crabbed old constable's incredulity changed to admiration for Ben's cleverness.

"Hold onto the feller a minute," Ben Spencer.

With that Farrar disappeared into his house, but came out again presently with a shotgun and a pair of handcuffs.

The latter he adjusted to the prisoner's wrists.

"Now, your halter off, boys; he won't get away."

The constable now took charge of the handcuffed prisoner, and made him march at the muzzle of the shotgun.

In this fashion they proceeded to the lockup in the basement of the town hall.

Constable Farrar pushed the prisoner into the only cell and locked the door.

"He may escape," Ben said, as they were going out.

"Think so?"

"Yes; he's ironed, I know, but if he can slip those handcuffs he'll break out easy enough."

"I reckon not."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a-goin' to stand guard outside the winder all night long, an' in the mornin' I'll take him to the county jail."

"Well, we must leave you now."

"Goin' to the store?"

"Yes."

"Well, if ye see any o' the folks thet's been robbed by this feller, send 'em up here to identify the prisoner."

"I will."

"A pretty busy night," Ben commented to Tom, as they drove on to the store.

"Yes. That cayenne pepper was a daisy trick. I saw you put the package on the seat in Rutledge, but I thought it was a package you were bringing up for some one."

"No, I bought it as a precaution against highwaymen, and it turned out to be very handy."

"Well, I should say so."

There was quite a crowd in Deacon Bumpus' store as the boys drove up.

They were all discussing that absorbing topic—the highwayman. Ben marched into the store, and went straight up to the deacon.

"Deacon, I saw Mr. Haight in Rutledge, and he gave me \$200 to pay to you."

"He must have been crazy!" retorted the old man. "Didn't he know there was a highwayman out?"

"Yes; I told him so."

"Well, where's the money, boy?"

"Deacon, we met that highwayman."

The explosion of a bomb could not have created more excitement.

Everybody crowded about the two boys.

"So ye lost the money," snarled Deacon Bumpus. "If it takes yer last cent, Ben Spencer, ye'll have t' make it good to me."

"To Mr. Haight, you mean!" Ben retorted. "It has nothing to do with you. Mr. Haight and myself would have had to settle it if I had lost the money. But it happened that I did not. Deacon, here's your \$200."

And Ben triumphantly produced the roll of bills which had been intrusted to him by the Rutledge merchant.

The deacon reached out both hands for the money.

"Sign this receipt, first, deacon, and then I'll hand you the money."

The deacon did so, and received the money.

"But what about that highwayman?" the old man demanded, testily. "What did ye want to tell me a lie like that fer?"

"It's no lie!" Ben retorted, triumphantly.

And, turning to the men gathered about him, our hero announced:

"Gentlemen, you'll find that highwayman in the cell under the town hall."

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### WADEVILLE ENJOYS A MYSTERY.

Disbelief was written on nearly every face.

It was incredible to these men of Wadeville that two striplings had vanquished and captured the daring highwayman who had made able-bodied men timorous about driving on lonely roads after dark.

"Ye generally tell the truth, but thet's a pretty thin yarn, Ben Spencer," observed one farmer.

Judson Foley, who was present, eyed his son sternly.

"Tell me the truth, Tom. Did you and Ben really capture a highway robber?"

"Yes, dad, that's just what we did."

Hank Sibley laughed aloud.

"Come off," he roared. "The idea o' two kids gittin' the best o' thet feller. Why, he made me come right down off my seat."

"And took your pistol away from you," retorted Ben, grimly. "Is this it?"

Our hero produced from his pocket the weapon he had taken from his prisoner.

Hank Sibley snatched the pistol and gazed at it in open-eyed amazement.

"No, thet ain't my pistol, but it's the one thet feller held me up with. I'd swear to it, anywhere. But how in the world did ye ever git it, Ben Spencer?"

"Took it from your terrible highwayman," Ben laughed.

"How did ye git the best o' the feller, Ben?" questioned Farmer Paul.

"Yes, how did ye do it?" came in a chorus.

"Well, gentlemen, you see, before we left Rutledge with all this money, I began to get nervous about the highwayman. I didn't have a pistol, and probably if I had he would have shot me before I could have used it."

"So I hit upon another scheme. I bought a bag of cayenne pepper, and put it on the seat beside me. Well, about three miles from here, as we were coming up the long hill, the fellow stepped out suddenly from behind a tree and told us to get off the wagon."

"I watched my chance and threw a handful of red pepper in his eyes. We had him easily enough after that. By the time he had washed his eyes at the brook, he was our prisoner, with his hands tied behind his back."

"So I brought him to the village, and turned him over to Constable Farrar, who now has him under guard at the lockup. That's all there is to it, gentlemen."

Farmer Paul pushed his way through the group, and grasped Ben's hand.

"Good for you, boy. Ye've got better stuff in ye than most o' the men in this village."

Several others joined in congratulating our hero.

But many were still sceptical.

Among these was Deacon Bumpus.

"All a pack of lies," he said, gruffly.

Judson Foley turned upon the old man.

"What makes you so sure of that, deacon?"

"Well, let's see the pepper," growled Bumpus.

Hank Sibley ran out to the wagon, and soon returned.

"Here it is!" he cried. "Ben, I believe ye now."

But the deacon was still incredulous.

"Bought the pepper on purpose t' bear out his yarn," was his comment.

"Hold on, we're all acting like fools," said Mr. Paul. "We'll go up to the lockup, all hands. We'll have ter b'lieve it when we see the prisoner."

The movement was a general one.

Even the deacon locked up his store and accompanied the delegation.

Two or three of the farmers carried lanterns.

"There's Farrar," announced Mr. Paul, who was one of those in the lead. "Hello-o-o, Farrar! Got a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"The highwayman."

A yell went up from the crowd.

"Hurrah for Ben Spencer!"

"Well, deacon, do you believe it now?" demanded Tom Foley.

"I'll believe it when I see the prisoner," the old man replied, testily.

Farrar came around, and let them into the cell.

The prisoner, standing in a corner, glared at them like a caged lion.

Those who had lanterns held them up to the robber's face, and all took a good look at him.

A man probably close on to forty, of medium stature, with a dark, repulsive face covered by a stubby beard, was what they saw.

He glared fiercely at them, as they stood about, staring curiously at him.

"Well, it tickles you, don't it?" he growled. "You jay-hawks all like to see a man in trouble. Wonder how many of you would want to see me alone outside."

At this bare suggestion several of the eager ones shrank back, as if they feared the caged robber would burst his fetters, and prove a match for the whole crowd.

"Thet's the feller," cried Farmer Paul. "I'd know him anywhere by his voice."

"So would I," affirmed Hank Sibley. "Say, man, what did ye do with that pistol ye took from me?"

"What pistol?" growled the prisoner.

"Ye know well enough."

"What do you take me for?"

"The feller who stood me up," rejoined Hank. "I'd swear to you till judgment day."

"Oh, of course," was the sneering answer, "ye're all ready to swear me into prison. I know what a crowd of country jay-hawks is every time."

"An' the country jay-hawks know what you are, too, every time," thundered Hank Sibley.

"Hold on," said Farmer Paul, "let me talk to him. What's yer name, prisoner?"

"Find out, if you can."

"Oh, you might as well tell me. That won't do you no harm."

"Well, then, it's Bob Cricketts," was the prisoner's sullen answer.

"An' what's yer business?"

"That's none of your business."

The village idiot, Jake, was among the curious throng.

He had been gently inserting his way forward to get a look at the prisoner, though it is doubtful if the simple-minded fellow understood what it was all about.

At last the simpleton worked himself into the front rank of the bystanders.

He took one good, searching look at Cricketts' face, and then uttered a piercing shriek, such as only an idiot can.

His eyes seemed phenomenally large, and he panted as if threatened with a fit.

"Le'me out! le'me out!" he gasped, pushing like a demon against the crowd which had gathered about him at this curious outbreak.

"Le'me out, le'me out! Bad man! hurt Jake! kill Jake! Le'me go, quick!"

They made way for him, and the poor, panting idiot rushed out of the lockup and fled down the street as if he fancied himself pursued by a legion of devils.

So astonished was every one that, for a few moments, no word was spoken.

"Poor Jake—poor Jake!" exclaimed Dr. Todd, at last. "Of all sad afflictions, I think idiocy the greatest."

"What's going to be done with me?" demanded Cricketts.

"Well, in the mornin' ye're a-goin' over to jail," said Farrar. "Then ye'll have yer trial, an' after that I reck'n likely enough ye'll go to State's prison."

"I go to prison?" roared Cricketts; "well, if I do, there'll be the devil to pay. Somebody besides me will suffer, I can tell you."

And he glared at the crowd in a way that was truly ferocious.

Every one had satisfied his curiosity now, and so the crowd turned to go.

Farrar locked the door of the cell, and resumed his sentinel duty outside the cell window.

"Can nothing be done for poor Jake, doctor?" asked Ben, as they walked away.

"I don't know, my boy," responded Dr. Todd. "When I was a young man I worked a good deal in the hospitals, and saw more or less of all kinds of lunatics. I have often resolved to investigate Jake's case, and see if it is possible to restore his shaded faculties."

"I wondered to-night, when I saw how uncontrollably Jake was frightened at sight of Cricketts, if there was anything in the past which has brought the two together. I would have asked Cricketts, but he is so sullen that I do not believe he would have told me anything."

The next morning all Wadeville was in a furore of excitement. Every one had heard of the capture of the highwayman, but now even more exciting news was abroad.

Cricketts had escaped.

"I can't imagine how he ever done it," Constable Farrar protested. "Ye see, 'long in the night I got taken awful hungry. I looked in the winder, an' I could hear the prisoner snorin'. So I thought I'd run home an' git a bite to eat."

"I wa'n't gone more'n twenty minutes, but when I came back the bars was wrenched off the winder, an' my man was gone—clean gone. There wa'n't hide nor hair of him around. Then I run an' got Mr. Paul out o' bed, an' him an' me made a search, but we couldn't even find a trace o' the feller. It's the most cur'usest thing I ever knew."

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE DEACON'S HEART ENLARGES.

Our two young friends kept resolutely to their express business despite the keen competition of Deacon Bumpus, and the result was that the latter began to gradually increase his prices.

The prices at length became so nearly what they were before his startling reduction that, one by one, the boys' old customers returned to them.

By the end of the summer the express line, or the "Wadeville and Rutledge Express," as it was now called, began to thrive once more.

But now there came another interruption.

The long summer vacation was over, and school opened again.

Ben Spencer's adopted mother was determined that he should have as complete an education as her means would afford.

"After this year dad's going to send me to the academy," Tom informed Ben, as they walked to school on the first morning of the term.

Ben sighed.

"I'd like to go with you, Tom, but I know mother can't afford to send me. However, if I can earn enough this winter as my share of the express business, perhaps I can get a year at the academy by doing some work when I study there."

"I believe you'd go to college if you got a chance, Ben."

"I know I would," our hero replied, so earnestly that Tom Foley stopped short after a moment's deliberation, and said:

"See here, Ben, I've got an offer to make you. I'll keep with you on the express business this winter, and go to Rutledge with you every Saturday, but you shall have all the profits. That ought to put you a good way through on your studies."

Ben's face lighted up at this generous offer, and he seized Foley's hand and squeezed it fervently.

"Thank you, Tom. That's a friend's offer every time, and I thank you more than I can tell you, but I can't accept it. I mean to go through life on the strength of my own endeavors, and I might as well begin while I am studying. Thank you for your kindness, though."

Ben was steadfast in his resolution not to accept "charity," as he smilingly termed it.

There was a new teacher this term.

On the first day of the term it was customary to fight the battle royal—to decide who should run the school, the teacher or the unruly boys.

The boys and girls, some forty in number, were all in school before nine o'clock.

At that hour the new teacher, who had been standing outside, entered the schoolroom and stepped to the platform.

A gigantic spit-ball whizzed by his head.

This was a signal for a shower of those missiles, but the new teacher paid no attention to them.

He was a short, slightly-built young man, narrow-chested and rather pale-faced.

"We'll git rid o' him in no time," whispered Bill Peters, a big, hulking fellow who stood very nearly six feet in his stockings.

His chum, Ed Saunders, another strapping youth, nodded and chuckled:

"You bet."

The new teacher rapped upon his desk.

"School will come to order, please."

Instantly all was still.

It was the lull before the storm.

"As perhaps you do not all of you know me," began the teacher,

"I will introduce myself to you as Edward Simpson. I have been selected by the school trustees to take charge of this school for the present year. With your co-operation, I shall hope to—"

"Cut it short," admonished Bill Peters, roughly.

The new teacher glanced at him quickly.

"What is your name?"

"Bill Peters."

"You must keep silent, Peters, while I am speaking."

"I'll talk when I've a mind to."

"Step forward," commanded Mr. Simpson, very calmly.

With a prodigious grin on his freckled face, Bill obeyed.

The other boys grinned, too.

"Peters, you must learn what all others here will have to learn—that I mean to maintain discipline while I am here, kindly if possible, but firmly in any event. Hold out your hand, sir."

The grin on Peters' face deepened as he saw the slightly-built teacher pick up a ruler.

"Won't do nothing of the sort," he retorted, bluntly.

"Then I shall have to use force," was Simpson's quiet response.

At this a roar of laughter went up from the scholars.

But Simpson seized Bill's hand.

Bill snatched his hand away and struck the new teacher a flat blow on one ear that sent him staggering back.

Then the big fellow doubled his fists, and assumed a grinning defensive.

"Come on if ye want."

Simpson "came on" with a suddenness that astonished the juvenile spectators.

Before Bill Peters could understand what had happened he staggered from a blow scientifically delivered on the jugular.

With a howl of rage the bully jumped at the little teacher, and gave three or four ponderous, hammering blows, which struck nothing but the unresisting air.

Three times Peters went to earth, and not once did he succeed in touching his slim opponent with his big red fists.

When Bill got up for the third time, he was obliged to confess, even in the presence of all the boys, that he had had all he wanted. His nose was bleeding, and he had all he could do to keep his left eye open.

To say even that the boys were amazed would but inadequately express their feelings.

Ed Saunders started to the relief of his chum.

But he didn't care to do it single-handed.

"Come on, fellers," he shouted, "come on an' rush the little dude outer school."

As he started forward, many other boys sprang to their feet.

Ben Spencer was among the number, but he stepped quickly to the teacher's side, and cried:

"Are you cowards, fellows, that so many of you rush to attack one man? If you attempt that, you've got to thrash me, too."

"Me, too," cried Tom Foley, springing to his chum's side.

That stayed the rush.

Many of the boys saw the cowardice of the move, and returned to their seats.

Saunders and a few more remained on their feet, undecided.

But they had already witnessed Schoolmaster Simpson's prowess, and Ben and Tom were known as two hard-fisted youths.

"Return to your seats, boys," commanded the teacher.

After a moment of hesitation, they sullenly obeyed.

"Not you, Master Peters. You may remain in front of the desk."

Simpson again picked up the ruler.

"Hold up your hand, Peters."

Bill obeyed, with very evident reluctance.

Whack! whack! whack!

"Ow!"

Whack! whack!

"Ow-w-w-w-w!"

The pain at last was more than Bill Peters could bear, and, big fellow though he was, he blubbered outright.

"Return to your seat, sir!"

And, ascending the platform, Mr. Simpson said:

"One of my accomplishments at college was boxing. I dislike to resort to force, but shall always do so when necessary to maintain discipline. I thank those scholars whose sense of fair play kept them from attacking me in a mass."

After that, the work of the morning went on quietly enough.

Things ran along smoothly at school for the next month.

Ben discovered that Mr. Simpson was well up in mathematics, and, as this was our hero's hobby, he spent many an hour of study outside the school with the new teacher.

The express business, meanwhile, did not suffer, for every Saturday the boys made their trip.

It was about this time that the then famous Barclay scheme for colonizing farmers in the Argentine Confederation began to be agitated in New England.

The opportunities for growing rich in a few years on the fertile farms and ranches of that far-away South American republic were discussed on all sides.

Even in Wadeville a furore was created by the scheme.

It was a red-letter day in the little village when the renowned Capt. Barclay himself came and addressed the people in the little town hall.

For days after little else was discussed in the village but the glorious possibilities of fortune in the Argentine Confederation.

Many of the farmers declared their anxiety to sell their farms and emigrate at once.

Even the boys caught the fever, Ben and Tom among them.

Deacon Bumpus called our hero one day into the office in the rear of his store.

"Ben, I hear ye'd like t' go to the Argentine Confederation?"

Ben's eyes sparkled.

"Yes, deacon, indeed I'd like to go. Of course, I don't want to give up my studies yet, but Capt. Barclay told me himself that I could easily get sixty dollars a month down there, herding cattle, and that I'd find plenty of young college men who have gone down there to work, and that they would teach me in leisure hours."

"It's a grand scheme for a good, healthy, active boy who's willin' to work," commented the deacon.

And then, after a long pause, he went on:

"Ben, what'd ye say if I was t' give ye yer fare, an' fifty dollars in yer pocket t' boot? Would ye go?"

Ben started, and almost gasped. He could hardly believe Deacon Bumpus capable of so magnificent an offer.

The old man rubbed his hands, and continued:

"Ye know, Ben, ye was kinder left on my hands, as it was. Now, I provided for yer boyhood, by gittin' Mis' Spencer to 'dopt ye. Now, I'm willin' t' give ye a start in life as well."

By the time that Ben got over his surprise, he began to feel suspicious.

Why was the deacon so anxious to have him go?

Not from generosity, surely, for those who knew the old man best had never accused him of liberality.

There was surely some hidden motive.

Ben sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing as this thought dawned upon him.

"Deacon Bumpus," he cried, "you'd better begin at the right end of this business by telling me why you are so anxious to have me leave Wadeville."

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MISFORTUNES FOR BEN.

Deacon Bumpus did not all at once recover from the astonishment which this outbreak from our hero caused him.

The old man gazed at the boy for some time without venturing to open his mouth.

"Why don't you answer me?" Ben demanded.

The deacon looked decidedly uneasy, dropped a quid of tobacco from his mouth, and put in a fresh chew.

"I don't know quite how to answer ye, boy, ye're so drefful sudden."

"You can answer me without stopping to consider, if you only want to answer," Ben persisted.

The deacon remained silent for so long that our hero said:

"Then I suppose I am to understand that you want to drop the conversation?"

"Then I s'pose it's agreed thet ye'd like to go," the old man responded, artfully. "There's a steamer goes, I think, in ten days."

"Never mind when it goes," Ben insisted. "Tell me now, please, why you want me to go."

"D'ye think ye'll be ready t' go by that steamer?" questioned the deacon, as if he had not heard Ben's query.

"I don't intend to go by any steamer, unless I know all the reasons why you want me to go."

"Why?" repeated the deacon, uneasily.

"Why?" he said again. "Why, because, Ben Spencer, I guess it's my duty toward ye."

"I didn't know," Ben rejoined, "that you considered it your duty to take any particular interest in me."

"But I do, boy."

"Why?"

"Because I do."

"That's no reason, deacon."

"Well, Ben Spencer, I guess the Lord had a hand in leaving you in a basket on my door-step when ye was a baby. He must a'been the cause o' thet, knowin' I'd feel it my duty as a steward to see thet the fatherless an' the motherless had as good a chance in the world as anybody else."

"At all events, I did what I thought was my duty. I provided

for yer childhood, an' now I'm ready to give ye a start in the world as a man, if ye're ready to let me, 'thout bein' sassy."

"I don't mean to be saucy, Deacon Bumpus, but before I accept an important proposition from any man, I want to know the reasons which actuate him in making the offer."

"Ain't I given ye a reason, boy?"

"Yes, but not the reason."

"Who knows best 'bout thet—you or me?"

"I have to use my own reasoning powers, deacon," Ben responded, quietly.

"What d'ye mean by thet, Ben Spencer?"

"I mean this, Deacon Bumpus. Nobody has ever accused you of liberality, and I never heard of your posing as a generous man, or wanting to be considered as such. Now, why you should make such an offer to a boy who has no claim upon you—that is, if I have no just claim upon you—is more than I can understand. I never settle an important matter in the dark, so you will have to be frank with me, if you really want me to go to South America."

Deacon Bumpus seemed to be getting more and more uneasy every moment.

"I tell ye, boy, thet it's the Lord's work I'm a-doin'—thet is, thet I'm tryin' to do."

"That is not a sufficient reason, sir."

"Don't ye believe I'm a-tellin' ye the truth?"

"Frankly, deacon, I don't."

At this, Deacon Bumpus jumped out of his chair, as if it were too hot to hold him.

"Wha-at!" he shouted. "Ye don't b'lieve me—a deakin o' the church?"

"Not in this instance, deacon, for my better sense argues against it."

"Ain't ye willin' to believe the word of a Christian?" demanded the old man.

"Yes, I would believe anything whatever that Parson Elkins told me," Ben answered. "That pure-minded old man is incapable of a lie."

"An' why won't ye believe me, boy?"

"Because I don't believe much in a Christian of your stamp."

"What!"

The old man seemed incapable of more than that solitary interjection.

"I have not meant to be rude to you," Ben went on; "but you invited frankness, and I have been frank with you."

"Ben Spencer, ye're goin' too far," the deacon muttered, hoarsely.

"Who am I and what am I?" Ben demanded. "You know, and you can tell me, if you will."

"I don't," the old man responded, with emphasis.

"As you value your peace of mind, tell me."

"I swear to ye, boy, thet I know no more than ye know yerself."

"I shall know all, some day, in spite of you, Deacon Bumpus."

As Ben said this, he arose and walked toward the door of the office.

"Don't go yit, Ben."

"Why not? It will do no good for me to remain."

"How 'bout South Ameriky, boy?"

"Your offer is declined, with thanks, deacon."

"Better think ag'in," urged the deacon.

"I have thought, and you know my decision."

"I shan't make the offer ag'in, if ye refuse," persisted the old man.

"Very well, sir; good-day."

"Ben Spencer, ye're an ongrateful young rascal, like all the boys o' this degenerate age. Ye'll be sorry for thet some day, when ye——"

But Ben waited to hear no more.

The office door closed behind him, and the deacon was left to his own reflections.

In those few minutes the old man had seemed to grow many years older. Now his features betrayed an ashy paleness.

"Cuss thet boy," he muttered. "He's jest as stubborn as a mawl. I'd give a heap ter take thet outer him."

Ben Spencer was stubborn.

Yet he felt that he had been right in talking as he did.

He had come to look upon Deacon Bumpus as his natural enemy. Feeling thus, our hero did well to inquire into all the old man's motives before accepting any kindness at his hands.

Somehow, Ben felt gloomy and oppressed, after that angry interview.

Unable to shake off this feeling, he did the most sensible thing. He went home and told his mother all.

"I don't know what to say, Ben," was that puzzled woman's reply. "I wish you hadn't spoken quite so sharply to the deacon. Yet it is very strange that he should want you to go to the Argentine Confederation, and that he should be willing to take all the expense upon himself. I don't understand it at all, but I think you did right, my boy, in refusing his offer."

Two days after that, on Friday night, Ben sat up late to study his geometry, which he was acquiring so rapidly under Schoolmaster Simpson's tuition as to astonish that worthy young pedagogue.

The Spencer cottage was a small affair, which, besides the ground floor, had two small rooms upstairs.

One of these was occupied at night by Mrs. Spencer, the other by Ben.

Our hero had finished the demonstration of a problem, and was reading aloud a new one to be worked out.

"If two circumferences are tangent to each other, the line of center passes through the point of contact."

With slate and pencil he began to study the proof of this theorem, when his labor was interrupted by a strong odor.

"Smells like smoke," he thought, pausing a moment in his labors. "Mother left the fire going in the kitchen stove, and the chimney must be choked."

He resumed his studies for a moment or two, and then put his slate down.

"Something must be afire," he mused.

He went to his window, in the back of the house, opened it and looked out.

A strong smell of smoke greeted his nostrils, but he could see no blaze.

"There is a fire somewhere," he declared, uneasily.

Going downstairs softly, lest he should awake his mother, he unlocked the front door and looked out.

Then he staggered back, startled.

The front of the cottage was a mass of flames.

"Fire! Fire!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

He dashed upstairs, and pounded at his mother's door.

"Mother! mother! Wake up!"

"Yes, my son; what is the matter?" Mrs. Spencer asked, drowsily, for the poor woman was tired from a hard day's work.

"Mother, the house is afire! Dress yourself quickly!"

He heard her spring from the bed, and then rushed to his own room.

Hurriedly seizing his small but precious stock of books, he hurled them through the open window into the back yard.

"They will not be destroyed," he said, and hurried down the stairs.

The fire was now burning more fiercely than before.

It had started at the front of the house, and by the time Mrs. Spencer was downstairs she was compelled to seek exit through the back door.

"Hurry to Mr. Foley's, mother. I will save what I can."

Mrs. Spencer flew down the street to the blacksmith's home, while Ben, by herculean efforts, managed to get considerable of their scanty furniture out of harm's way.

Five minutes had not passed when Mr. Foley and Tom came running breathlessly up.

Wadeville boasts of no fire apparatus.

Judson Foley took in the situation at a glance, and said:

"We can't save the house, so we'll get out what furniture we can."

After a few minutes they were compelled to cease their efforts, for the whole cottage was now in flames, and it would have been foolhardiness to enter.

Other near neighbors hurried to the scene, but they could do nothing.

Mrs. Spencer and Ben stood as if dazed, witnessing the swift destruction of the only home they knew.

In less than half an hour the cottage had burned to the ground, and what had been a happy home was now but a mass of smoldering embers.

"You must come to our house for the present," said Judson Foley, and Mrs. Foley seconded this invitation.

They turned and walked toward the Foley house, mother and son casting many a backward look at the smoking heap.

"What will we do now?" Ben asked, gloomily.  
 "Fear not, my boy," his mother replied, with brave composure;  
 "I have always found that 'the Lord will provide.'"

## CHAPTER XVII.

BEN SPENCER TURNS BUILDER.

The next day being Saturday, the regular business of the Wadeville and Rutledge Express had to be attended to, and this gave Ben no other opportunity than to take a mere look at the remains of his former home.

Saturday night a council was held in the Foley sitting-room.  
 "I made a great mistake," said Mrs. Spencer, "of not having the cottage or its contents insured."

"A great mistake, indeed," commented Mrs. Foley. "So you have only the ground on which the house stood, and some money, I suppose."

"A little," Mrs. Spencer sighed, "but not enough to enable me to rebuild. How much would it take, Mr. Foley?"

The blacksmith was lost in thought for some moments.

"About a thousand dollars, I should say," he ventured at last.  
 "That is, to build a substantial little house. But you might build one a little less substantial for a hundred or two less, if you engaged a careful builder."

Mrs. Spencer shook her head.

"It might as well be two thousand," she said, mournfully. "I shall have to give up the idea of a home of my own again. And yet there isn't a single house to let in the village. I don't see what I am to do, unless I move from Wadeville, and it is hard to make a change at my time of life."

"You are a young woman still," said the blacksmith, "and in the prime of health and strength."

"You and Ben can easily make your home with us for the present," put in Mrs. Foley.

"Mother," cried Ben, who had been in a "brown study" for some minutes, "can you tell me just how much money we have on hand?"

"Why, my son?"

"I have an idea, mother."

"What is it?"

"Answer me first, please; I want to know whether the idea is practical."

"Besides the few dollars I have in my purse, we have three hundred and ten dollars in the bank. That represents your savings and mine."

Ben made no immediate reply to this.

When he did speak his face was radiant.

"I can do it."

"Do what, Ben?"

"Rebuild the house."

There was a flutter of interest in the little circle.

"What is your plan, Ben?" queried the blacksmith.

"I am going to be my own builder," the boy responded, triumphantly.

Mrs. Spencer shook her head.

Judson Foley looked thoughtful.

"Do you mean that you will do it alone?" the latter asked at last.

"Certainly, since we haven't money enough to be able to hire labor. The money we have will, I think, buy the materials. I am ready to begin Monday morning."

Mrs. Spencer looked anxiously at the blacksmith.

"What do you think of this plan, Mr. Foley?"

"I have been thinking it over," the blacksmith replied, slowly. "There is certainly one thing in Ben's favor. The cellar is dug, and the underpinning is sound. Ben could start in by laying the heavy timbers. But what do you know of carpentry, my boy?"

"Very little," our hero admitted, frankly. "But I believe I can learn. With such a need staring us in the face I think I am bound to succeed. I will go slow as I build, and not take any important step until I have thought it out."

"First of all," said Mr. Foley, "the burned timbers will have to be carted away and the cellar cleared out. That would be a day's work for several men."

"Then I can do it," Ben rejoined, "by putting in several days' work at the task."

"I can suggest a better plan than that," the blacksmith continued. "I have very little work on hand for Monday, so I can

help you. And, as farm work is slack, I think we can count upon Mr. Paul and his hired man, along with one of Paul's large carts."

"But I don't want help gratis," protested Ben, "and we are too poor to pay for it. No, I would prefer to do the best I can alone."

"My boy, you have one lesson to learn," rejoined Mr. Foley. "You must never disdain the help of neighbors in time of trouble. I shall be very glad to help you Monday, and I feel sure that I can say as much for Paul. People owe a duty to help their neighbors in time of misfortune."

This plan was agreed to, and then a more formidable question presented itself.

That was to draw the plans of the projected cottage.

"And that will prove one of our first difficulties," said the blacksmith. "We must do some deep thinking as we go along."

The little party gathered about the table, and paper, pencils, a ruler and a pair of dividers were forthcoming.

It proved, as the blacksmith had said, a difficult undertaking for people who are not used to it.

A genuine "committee of the whole" it was.

Mr. Foley and Ben did the bulk of the work. Tom was fertile in suggestions, not all of which were strictly useful, and Mrs. Foley and Mrs. Spencer made many suggestions about the interior arrangements of the cottage.

It was after midnight when they went to bed, but the crudely drawn plans had been completed and approved.

"It will be true economy for you to hire a carpenter for a few days at the outset," Mr. Foley had said. "With your help he can put in the foundation timbers and the uprights, and after that you will find it plainer sailing."

So this idea was agreed to.

"But Ben will have to leave school in order to turn builder," Mrs. Spencer had objected, "and I did want him to keep at school for some time yet."

"Never mind, mother," Ben responded, cheerily. "I can still study, and I can go to Mr. Simpson occasionally in the evening for help over the hard places in my books."

Monday morning, bright and early, they were at work.

Farmer Paul had evinced a complete readiness to help, and he and his hired man were on hand with a two-horse cart.

That day all the *débris* was carted away, and everything put in readiness for the carpentering work.

Then two more days were required to get the first load of lumber and other supplies.

A carpenter came from one of the neighboring villages, and on Thursday morning he and Ben began work.

Mr. Foley called Ben into the blacksmith shop, and handed him a hammer.

"It's made in a homely way, my boy, but it's more serviceable than the hammers that are sold nowadays. You will have many a nail to drive, so I made you this to start your stock of tools."

Ben thanked him, delighted with this additional evidence of good will.

For eight days the carpenter was needed.

Then Ben paid him, and started in upon the task of finishing by himself.

As soon as the carpenter was gone our hero found himself confronted by many difficulties he had not thought of before.

But he kept manfully to his work of building.

The kitchen of the cottage was to be in the "L," and, while the carpenter remained, the "L" had been floored and roofed, roughly, leaving the sides and finishing to be done.

In three weeks from the time of beginning, this "L" was sufficiently completed for Mrs. Spencer to move in and take possession.

True, the kitchen was not yet plastered, and it was awkward in many ways to live in one small room, but Mrs. Spencer was not inclined to complain when she saw how hard Ben was working in the face of all difficulties.

They were compelled to live altogether in the one room. At night a curtain, suspended from a wire, divided the small kitchen into two tiny sleeping apartments.

Our hero did not neglect his studies while thus busily engaged. Every spare moment was devoted to his books, and many an evening Ben spent with Schoolmaster Simpson, who was glad of an opportunity to help so industrious a boy.

"I have often wondered how the old cottage got ablaze," said Mr. Foley, pausing one day to watch the work.

Ben and his mother were holding a heavy board in position

against the side of the new structure, while the boy drove a few nails to keep it in place.

When this was done, Ben turned to the blacksmith and said:

"I can tell you how the fire caught. It was set by some one."

"So I have feared," rejoined the blacksmith; "but who could have had the heart to burn a widow out of her house, and for the matter of that, who could have any motive?"

"I can think of no one," Ben answered, "unless, possibly, it was Bob Crickets."

"The highwayman?"

"Yes."

"He may have had some grudge against you for turning him over into custody. Still, as he escaped, that didn't amount to much, and I should say that he would have left this part of the country as soon as he escaped, instead of hanging about with the risk of State's prison staring him in the face. Still, if the house was set on fire by some one, it must have been Crickets."

"Unless——"

Ben stopped and bit his tongue.

"What were you going to say, Ben?"

"Nothing, sir."

Ben was at work one day, assisted by Farmer Paul, who had got off his wagon in passing to give the boy a little help.

Egbert Eastman, who had lately returned from the academy, where he had been studying, lounged along, and stood contemplating the work.

"What are you trying to do, Ben Spencer?"

"Build a house," Ben responded, briefly, for he did not like the young dandy.

Eastman gave vent to a cry of pretended surprise.

"It don't look much like one," he said, rudely. "Building houses don't seem much in your line, Spencer."

The tone was disagreeable and sneering.

It was evident that the rich widow's son wanted to hurt our hero's feelings.

Farmer Paul looked up from his work, and said, quietly:

"Mebbe buildin' houses ain't in Ben's line, but work is, an' he'll be all the happier man for that reason. It wouldn't do ye any harm if ye had to work a little."

"I don't have to," retorted Eastman, disdainfully. "My mother is able to make a gentleman of me."

"Ye'll have ter do thet yerself, boy. No mother can altogether do a job like thet, though she kin help powerful by bringing her boy up right. Fine close an' hair-oil don't make a gentleman, an' never did."

"I wouldn't be a carpenter, anyway," Eastman went on, trying again to wound our hero. "It's a mean business—only fit for clod-hoppers."

"It was a good enough trade for our Lord an' Saviour," Farmer Paul retorted, so gently that Eastman was disconcerted for the moment.

Then he walked about, inspecting the structure with an evident disdain, to which, however, he did not deem it wise to give voice.

"I hear ye're home from the academy for good?" Paul went on, after a while.

"Yes; mother says it's time I finished with my studies."

"So thet was why ye left?"

"Yes."

"I was down t' Bakersville the other day," Mr. Paul continued, "an' I heard a ruther different story 'bout it."

"Did you?" demanded Eastman, and his face turned very red.

"Yes, I heard that you an' two other boys was expelled for sneakin' out late at night an' going to a low saloon t' play cards for money."

"That's a lie!" Eastman cried, passionately.

"I thought mebbe it was, an' thet's why I didn't say nothin' 'bout it around here before," was the farmer's dry rejoinder.

"It's a lie," Eastman repeated, with an oath.

"I got it pretty straight, though," Mr. Paul declared.

"From the saloon, I s'pose," Eastman sneered.

"No, boy, I never keep low company."

Egbert saw Ben smiling quietly, and the sight was too much for him.

He started off in a rage, muttering:

"Now I suppose that story about my gambling and being expelled will be all over town. I don't see why folks here in Wadeville think so much of that ragamuffin, Spencer, and yet won't treat me decently."

The trouble with Egbert Eastman was that he had never tried to understand this difference between himself and Ben. The reason was quite plain to any one else who knew the two boys.

"I'd like to see Ben Spencer in big disgrace," he muttered, as he turned into the road that led to his luxurious home. "Maybe that would kill some of his airs, and change people's overestimate of him."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### ANOTHER ENCOUNTER WITH BOB CRICKETTS.

Although Bert Eastman had unlimited leisure, he did not take the trouble to go near the scene of Ben Spencer's labors again.

And, fearing that the story of his disgrace and expulsion from the academy was now common property, the young dandy held aloof from all the villagers.

Ben worked cheerfully on, now and then receiving a helping hand from his chum and also from Mr. Foley and Farmer Paul.

By the latter part of November the new cottage had a rather complete appearance from the outside, although there yet remained several weeks' work to be done on the inside.

The windows were all in, and the doors hung, so that the house, though unfinished, was habitable.

And, in the meantime, he lost no ground in his studies. On the contrary, his progress was a source of great gratification to Mr. Simpson, who had so generously given him instruction in the evening.

"We'll eat Thanksgiving dinner in our own home, after all, mother," Ben said, cheerily.

"Yes, Ben, thanks to your persistency and industry. You have good reason to be proud of your industry, my son. But for you, we should have no roof of our own over our heads."

"And the roof is shingled, too, mother, that's the best of it," the boy responded, laughingly. "I don't believe I should have ever got that right if Mr. Foley hadn't been so patient in showing me."

"We have much to thank our neighbors for, my boy."

They were eating their midday meal in the kitchen. As they finished, Ben arose, and pulled on his shabby overcoat, saying:

"I need some hinges, screws and bolts, mother, so I shall walk over to Pelton for them this afternoon."

"Walk, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Why not drive?"

"Because the horse must go to Rutledge to-morrow, and I don't want to tire the poor brute to-day. Besides, the walk across the fields will do me good. I shall take Rover with me."

Ben whistled for the dog and set out.

It was a brisk walk to Pelton, but our hero enjoyed it in that keen, bracing November air.

At Pelton, the nearest village to Wadeville that boasted of a hardware store, Ben made his purchases, and then set out for home.

"I can hang the doors upstairs, and do some other work to-night," he reflected on the way homeward.

There still remained so much to be done about the uncompleted cottage that it was only by careful planning that he was able to make the most of his time.

The bundle of hardware, though not a large one, grew rapidly heavier as he walked—at least, it seemed as if it did, for he was obliged to change it from under one arm to the other with great frequency.

When within a mile and a half of his home he had to pass through a deep forest known as Jones' Woods.

It was a gloomy piece of woods, and the approaching twilight of the open was here intensified into deep gloom.

He had got about half through the forest, when he suddenly came almost face to face with a slouching figure.

Ben would have passed on without comment, but he noticed that the fellow shrank from observation.

Our hero thought it best to know who the passerby was.

So he stopped short, and demanded:

"Who are you?"

The fellow pulled his hat over his eyes, and turned to run off at right angles, but Ben, with a spring, placed himself squarely in front of him.

He caught a quick glimpse of the face, and cried, in astonishment:

"Bob Crickets!"

"Well, what of it, kid?"

"I remember you."

"What if you do?"

"You were arrested for highway robbery and escaped."

"That's got nothing to do with you, has it?"

"Yes, it has!" retorted Ben. "It was I who put you in custody for attempting to rob me. I mean to see you back in the hands of the law."

"You've taken a big contract, kid!" Cricketts cried, angrily.

"And I can fill it, too," Ben retorted.

Raising his bundle of hardware, Ben threw it at the highwayman.

It struck the latter full in the breast, and sent him to earth.

"Curse you, kid," howled Cricketts; "I'll have your life for that!"

"No you won't. Watch him, Rover!"

Before Cricketts could get up, the dog, with a low growl, sprung at his throat.

"Now, you'll stay there," Ben went on, "that is, until I tell you to get up."

"What do you want?"

"I want to ask you some questions."

"Go ahead, but be quick."

"Well, in the first place, why did you set fire to my home?"

"I didn't!" cried Cricketts, and his look of surprise went far to convince Ben that he was telling the truth.

"I didn't," Cricketts repeated. "I don't know your name, boy, and I don't know where you live. I haven't been here before since I broke out of the lockup. You're the kid that caught me on that cayenne pepper trick. What's your name, anyhow?"

"Ben Spencer."

"Spencer," mumbled Cricketts. "Not the son of Henry Spencer?"

"He was my adopted mother's husband."

"Ah! so you know you are only the adopted son. Do you know more than that about yourself?"

"No," Ben answered, and then demanded, eagerly:

"Do you?"

"I reckon I know all about you," chuckled Cricketts. "I could tell you who your father and mother were."

Ben felt dizzy.

Here, at last, was the long-looked-for opportunity to discover the mystery of his parentage.

"Tell me about my parents," he urged, imploringly.

"That depends," retorted Cricketts, with a smile.

"Upon what?"

"Depends upon what sort of terms I can make with you."

"Go on! Speak!" Ben cried, breathlessly.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A STUBBORN INTERVIEW.

"In the first place," commanded Cricketts, "call your dog off."

"And let you make your escape?" queried Ben. "Oh, no."

"Then I haven't a word to say," retorted Cricketts, firmly.

This would never do.

Ben Spencer had at last run across the opportunity of his life—that of solving the mystery of his parentage.

Cricketts must be kept in good humor.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Ben replied. "If you want to sit up, I'll call the dog to me, and hold him by the collar."

"All right," sullenly.

"But remember—at the first sign of your trying to escape I shall set Rover upon you, and the dog has sharp teeth."

"Call him off. I understand."

"Here, Rover, come here, sir."

The dog, though usually obedient to his young master, showed little inclination to obey in this instance.

Instead, he bristled up, growled and showed his teeth to the highwayman in a most unfriendly manner.

"You see, Cricketts, he does not trust you," Ben remarked, quietly.

The command had to be twice repeated before Rover consented to crouch at his master's side.

Ben recovered his package of hardware, and used it as a seat, keeping his hand on Rover's collar.

The dog bristled up again, and made frantic bounds to get at the highwayman, as soon as Cricketts endeavored to sit up.

Thereupon the latter endeavored to move away, but Ben said, warningly:

"Stay where you are, Cricketts, or I shall let the dog at you."

"I was moving because I was afraid you wouldn't be able to hold him," remonstrated the highwayman.

"I shan't be able to hold him if you attempt to move away from here," was the significant retort. "Sit down. Now, you mentioned terms. What are they?"

Cricketts replied, slowly:

"The secret doesn't really belong to me. I have no right to part with it, and I wouldn't unless it were to gain the most precious thing in life to me—my liberty."

He paused.

"Your terms?" Ben insisted.

"That after I have told you all, you will allow me to escape and that you give me your word not to mention having seen me hereabouts."

"Impossible."

"Eh?"

"Impossible, I say."

"Then you don't care to become possessed of my secret, Spencer?"

"Not to the extent of conniving at your escape from justice. That would make me practically an accomplice of yours, and no good end is ever attained by wrongdoing."

"You talk like a parson," sneered Cricketts.

"No, I am trying to both talk and act as an honest man should," Ben replied, very quietly.

"Then my terms don't suit?" Cricketts demanded.

"No, you will have to change them—modify them."

Just at dark Ben and his prisoner halted outside the constable's house.

"Mr. Farrar!" he shouted. "Mr. Farrar."

The front door opened.

"Who's there?"

"Ben Spencer."

"What do you want?"

"I've got your highwayman again."

"Bob Cricketts?"

"Yes."

The constable gave voice to an ejaculation of intense surprise.

"Hold on a minute, and I'll be there."

Constable Farrar soon came out with a shotgun.

Stepping close to Cricketts, he peered into his face, and recognized the highwayman.

"Well, I'll be gummed!" he muttered. "Step along lively, Bob Cricketts, t' the town hall, an' remember I've got this loaded gun p'inted at yer back."

"Better handcuff him," Ben advised.

"Can't. When the feller got away before, he took my only pair of irons with him."

"Then why not tie his hands?"

"Don't need to," was the muttered reply of the constable. "I jest want this feller t' try an' escape—that's all. It'll save the country a heap in court expenses, and cost little to bury him."

This was said loudly, with the intention that Cricketts should hear and comprehend it.

The constable started off with his prisoner at the muzzle of the shotgun, and Ben, feeling that his share of the task was done, hurried home.

When the officer had got his prisoner nearly to the town hall Cricketts turned suddenly.

The constable was vigilant, but the prisoner, by an incomprehensible twist of his body, brought his shoulder under the gun and knocked its muzzle upward.

Bang!

Farrar's gun was discharged, but uselessly.

The next moment a well-administered blow of Cricketts' fist sent the constable to the ground.

Then the highwayman struck the old man a blow on the head with the butt of the gun, which rendered him senseless.

It was the work of a moment for Cricketts to stoop down and extract several loaded shells from the officer's coat pocket.

Casting a hurried look about him, Bob Cricketts, loading the gun as he went, sped off in the darkness.

The report of the gun was heard from the store.

Hank Sibley was the only one there besides the proprietor.

"By hokey, there's a gun!" cried Hank. "Most likely some—"

body's been shot, or shot at. Turn the key in the door, deakin, an' we will soon find out what the trouble is."

Hank ran out of the store and up the road; but the deacon stayed where he was, not caring to risk his own life.

Hank had not gone far on the dark road when he suddenly stumbled over some obstruction and fell.

The next moment he made the discovery that the obstruction was the body of some human being.

"Come on, deakin," bawled Hank, "there is nothing to be afear'd on."

The lantern began to move again, then stopped, and at last came slowly but steadily forward.

"Why, it's ol' man Farrar!"

"The constable!"

"Who kin hev done this?" mumbled the deacon.

"Don't know, of course; but his heart's beatin', an' the best thing we can do is to git the ol' man down t' the store."

The constable was not a heavy burden, and they soon deposited him on a lounge in the store.

Hank made a clumsy but earnest nurse. He washed the blood away from a bruise on the constable's scalp.

An hour later, fully fifty men and boys divided up into small parties, and searched for miles in all directions, but without avail.

Bob Cricketts had made good his escape a second time.

And Constable Farrar, now resting in his own bed, was found to be hurt considerably more than was at first supposed.

Ben Spencer had been among the searchers.

Returning home between ten and eleven, he found Mrs. Spencer still up, awaiting his return.

"I couldn't go to bed until you came back, my boy. But why were you so anxious to join in the search? There were plenty without you, and you surely did more than your share by arresting him this afternoon."

"Mother, I was anxious to have Bob Cricketts caught. I feel sure that he, and he alone, can clear the mystery of my parentage, which I am determined to unravel."

Although Ben knew that Mrs. Spencer was even no relation to him, he still kept up that endearing term of "mother."

He had told her, when he first came home, of the conversation he had had with Cricketts.

Now they sat down to discuss in all its bearings the latest information which our hero had gathered from the highwayman.

"He admitted, mother, that he was concerned in the secret of my infancy. He did not admit that Deacon Bumpus knew anything about my origin, but I still believe that the old man could tell all, if he were willing."

"That Deacon Bumpus ever will tell, I have not the slightest hope, and so I must keep an eye open for Cricketts. But one thought strikes me," Ben went on, with sudden earnestness. "You remember the time Cricketts escaped so mysteriously from the lockup?"

"Well, I have always believed that he wouldn't have got away without help from the outside. Now that I have reason to believe that Cricketts and the deacon were mixed up in some shady transaction, it seems to me that there is good ground for suspecting the deacon of conniving at that escape."

Mrs. Spencer looked very grave indeed.

"I wouldn't jump at that conclusion too quickly, Ben," she said.

"I mean, when the times comes," our hero resumed, "to charge the deacon with helping Cricketts to escape. I may succeed in making the old man believe that I know it to be a fact, and then for fear of denouncing him for helping a person to escape, he may be frightened into telling me the truth."

"It will be a bold stroke, but better to play that card and fail than not to try it at all."

Mrs. Spencer still looked grave, but ventured no comment.

There was a long pause in the conversation, but at length Ben's face lit up with the sudden animation inspired by a new idea.

"Mother," he cried, "you remember that I told you the night we all saw Cricketts in the lockup, how scared poor Jake, the idiot, was, as soon as he once caught sight of Bob's face. The poor idiot ran away, in the fear that Cricketts would hurt, or even kill him."

"Now, why was Jake so terrified? There must be something in it more than mere momentary terror. I begin to feel that Jake's past is in some way mixed up with that of Bumpus and Cricketts."

"Dr. Todd told me, that same evening, that he meant to ex-

periment with Jake some day, and see if it were not possible to restore his reason."

"But," objected Mrs. Spencer, "if your surmise is correct, and Jake, Cricketts and Deacon Bumpus are all mixed up together, why is not Jake also afraid of the old man? I am sure he and Deacon Bumpus have always seemed to get along all right together."

"Mother," Ben wound up, "I cannot answer your objection, but I am sure I have hit upon an idea too valuable to lose. Tomorrow I shall see Dr. Todd, and beg him, on my knees, if necessary, to begin at once to attempt to restore Jake's reason. It is impossible to conjecture what that poor idiot may reveal, if once the light of reason and memory re-enters his darkened soul."

The next night, after supper, Ben seated himself near the fire, and picked up one of his books to study.

"There's some one coming," said Mrs. Spencer, pausing suddenly in her knitting.

Footsteps could be heard outside.

"Tom, most likely," Ben commented.

Then there came a loud knock upon the door.

The boy laid aside his book, and opened the door.

He staggered back in surprise. He could hardly believe his eyes.

"Jake! Jake!" he cried.

It was, indeed, the poor idiot, grinning at the astonishment which he had innocently caused.

"Come in, come in!" Ben gasped, dragging the simple-minded fellow through the doorway.

Jake stalked in, pulled off a pair of coarse woolen mittens, and began to warm his hands over the stove.

"Cold," he muttered. "Jake hungry. Thought mebbe ye'd give him somethin' to eat."

"Indeed we will," Ben cried, joyfully. "You've come to the right place this time, my friend."

And Mrs. Spencer, delighted at this fortunate event, began to prepare the best meal that her cupboard afforded.

The idiot fell to and devoured the food with an eagerness that bespoke a famished condition.

When the meal was disposed of, Ben began to question him.

"You've been away from town for a few days, Jake?"

"Yes; big fool."

"Why did you go?"

"Deacon Bumpus."

"You went with Deacon Bumpus?"

The idiot scowled hard at the floor, trying to recollect, for his memory was a treacherous one.

"I went to Elkow," he mumbled, finally.

"Why, yes," Ben exclaimed, encouragingly. "You and Deacon Bumpus went to Elkow together, don't you remember?"

The idiot's face brightened.

"Yes—yes, that's so," he cried.

"And where did you go after that?"

Again Jake scowled at the floor, trying to gather his feeble wits. All in vain.

He could not remember, though he tried hard, where the old man had taken him.

But, with many promptings and urgings, he gave a long, rambling account of his journey from Wadeville.

About all that Ben Spencer could gain from it was that the deacon had lured the idiot away from Wadeville, by holding out some inducement, the nature of which Jake could not remember.

Plainly it was not money, for the idiot was absolutely without a penny.

A feeling of unrest, probably, had impelled him to return to Wadeville soon after Deacon Bumpus parted company with him.

Having no money, the simpleton was compelled to walk all the way, depending upon the charity of people along the road for his food.

Where he had spent the nights he could not tell, further than a confused notion about barn-lofts.

"Jake," said Ben, rising, "will you come with me?"

"Yep."

The idiot was most tractable, always reposing blind confidence in those whom his dog-like instinct told him he could trust.

The two pulled on their coats, and set out for Dr. Todd's.

Not caring to take the risk of being seen by any of the villagers, lest the fact of his having been seen with Jake should reach the deacon's ears prematurely, our hero eschewed the roads and struck out across the hard, frozen fields.

A tramp of fifteen minutes brought them to the doctor's door.

The old family practitioner admitted them himself.

"Why, bless me, Ben Spencer," cried the doctor, "it's you and Jake, sure enough!"

"Yes, sir. Jake's come back, and I brought him here at once."

"Step in here."

The doctor led them into his office, where a cozy fire burned in the grate.

A book containing plenty of pictures was handed to the idiot, who sat down and scanned them with delight, totally oblivious to the conversation which the other two carried on.

"Of course, Ben, you want me to begin my experiments upon Jake."

"Yes, sir, if you please."

"I will start in to-morrow. I will manage to keep Jake here for the present. I shall have little difficulty in keeping him content, poor fellow."

"And, of course, sir," Ben went on, earnestly, "you won't let anybody know that Jake is here?"

"Certainly not, my young friend. I have heard enough of your story to know why you want secrecy. I was telling Dr. Tulliver, of Fordham, about the case, and he is anxious to study Jake with me, so I shall drive over after Tulliver to-morrow."

"Tulliver is a young man, recently graduated from the Harvard Medical School, and he is familiar with much that is new to us old practitioners. I think my thirty years' experience, and Tulliver's knowledge of new methods, will prove a valuable combination. We are both in hopes that our work in Jake's case will develop new facts to the medical profession."

"Of course, my boy, you will be very anxious to know how the experiment is coming on. If you will come every night, about this time, I will give you the latest bulletin from our patient."

Ben thanked the kindly old physician, and returned home, his brain in a whirl of excitement.

That night, for the first time in his life, he was unable to sleep. All through the next day he worked like one in a trance.

When night came he hurried to Dr. Todd's.

"Tulliver was here to-day," said the physician. "We have examined Jake's head and are satisfied that the loss of reason was due to a blow or a fall. His skull has been fractured, and a small piece of the bone is undoubtedly pressed against the brain."

"A surgical operation—a most delicate one—will be necessary. The pressure of the piece of bone removed, the brain may resume its natural functions, or it may not. We shall perform the operation to-morrow. Come again to-morrow night."

On the night following Dr. Todd said:

"The operation was safely performed this afternoon."

"And the result?" Ben cried, eagerly.

"Is uncertain yet, my boy. Jake is weak, and practically unconscious from the effect of the anesthetics. It may be days before I can decide the failure or success of the operation."

The days that followed were filled with more wretched suspense than Ben Spencer had ever before known.

On the evening of the fifth day after the operation, our hero found good old Dr. Todd in a state of great excitement.

"The patient is better," he cried. "While still very weak in mind and body, he has, at last, no recollection of Jake, the idiot, and that is the most hopeful sign I could ask for."

"Who is he?" eagerly.

"That I do not know yet, my boy."

"May I see him?"

"No, sir!" replied the man of medicine, sternly. "Rest and quiet are above all what the patient needs for the present."

"When can I see him and talk with him?"

Dr. Todd hesitated and reflected.

"Come in three days, at four in the afternoon," he said, at last.

"Not before?" Ben cried, disappointedly.

"No, and perhaps not even then. The condition of the patient must alone decide."

Those three days were a torture of suspense to our young hero. They came to an end at last, as all things must, and Ben presented himself at the doctor's house promptly at the time set.

"Well?" the boy cried, eagerly.

"The experiment is a complete success," the old man exclaimed, triumphantly. "The pressure upon the brain is removed, and the patient is now as sane as you or I."

"And I may see him?"

"At once."

Ben followed the good old man into the parlor, and then started back in amazement.

But for the attendant circumstances, he would never have recognized in the man before him he who was once Jake, the idiot.

For the former idiot was attired in the garb of a gentleman, his shaggy hair trimmed neatly, his beard shaven off, and, above all, the light of reason shining through his eyes.

The former Jake arose, and offered his hand courteously to our hero.

"You are Ben Spencer, I imagine—the young man to whom Dr. Todd says I really owe my recovery to reason. Allow me to tender you the most hearty thanks that man ever felt—and to our good friend, the doctor, as well. But first of all, permit me to introduce myself as Henry Goodnow."

"And now," cried Dr. Todd, when they had seated themselves, "now for the most wonderful story that man ever told."

## CHAPTER XX.

### HENRY GOODNOW'S STORY.

Henry Goodnow—no longer Jake, the idiot—looked far from well.

The operation had been a severe test to his powers of physical endurance.

He had a habit of passing his hand over his forehead every now and then, in a way that showed his mental faculties were not yet altogether clear, though he was as sane as could be wished.

"I understand, my young friend," he began, addressing himself to Ben, "that you are particularly interested in hearing my story. You have an idea, so Dr. Todd informs me, that your history and mine are in some way interwoven."

"Be that as it may. I do not know. I will tell you all that I can of myself, and, by the old process of putting two and two together, you may be able to arrive at some conclusion concerning yourself."

Mr. Goodnow paused, and again passed his hand over his forehead, as if he were seeking to brush up clouded memories.

Dr. Todd, who sat facing his patient, watching him with the greatest anxiety, now poured a glass of wine, and handed it to him.

"Thanks," said Goodnow, and continued:

"You will be startled, young man, when you learn that I am only twenty-four years of age. Ah, I thought I should surprise you by saying that, but I do not, of course, mean that you should take me literally. What I mean is, that I was twenty-four years old when I suddenly ceased to be Henry Goodnow, and entered upon a state of mental suspension from which I have just emerged and become myself again."

"What?" cried Ben Spencer, in amazement. "You have no recollection of the years you have spent in this village as a farm laborer? You remember nothing of your life here, where you have been known only as Jake?"

"Nothing," Henry Goodnow replied, calmly.

"You do not even remember my bringing you here a few nights ago?" our hero demanded, almost incredulously.

"No, I do not. I do not even remember you, although I will admit that there is something strangely familiar in your face."

"This is more than strange," Ben exclaimed.

"The workings of Nature and of Providence are more than passing strange," Dr. Todd commented, gravely. "My friend Goodnow has aptly described his odd experiences, when he says that he has just emerged from a state of suspended mentality. During all the years of his idiocy he remembered nothing of Henry Goodnow. Now that he is Henry Goodnow again, he has not the faintest remembrance of the simpleton Jake. He has lived two lives, and Goodnow and Jake are utter strangers."

"Marvelous!" the boy cried.

And then his interest in the psychological problem faded before his anxiety to hear Goodnow's account of himself.

"Go on," he begged. "Tell me what you know of Deacon Bumpus."

"My acquaintance with him," Goodnow continued, "came about through his sister, Martha. I had just finished my studies, preparatory to embarking in the career of a civil engineer. I met Martha Bumpus in Boston, while she was visiting an aunt of hers who lived there."

"It was the old story over again. I loved her, and told her so. Then I learned from her own lips that she loved me. We had known each other but a short time, but we were not the less sure of our mutual love."

"She informed me that her brother, Moses Bumpus, was her guardian, and begged me to accompany her to Wadeville, for the purpose of obtaining her brother's consent. I did so.

"Moses Bumpus was surprised at seeing me, and I instinctively perceived that he was also displeased. Nevertheless, I requested a private interview with him, and obtained it. Then and there I declared the love which Martha and I bore each other, and formally asked permission to wed her.

"It would be difficult to describe the passion into which he flew at hearing my words.

"He termed me an adventurer, a thief, an impostor, a villain.

"The thought that he was Martha's brother saved him from the castigation which I was convinced he richly deserved at my hands.

"There is no occasion to vilify me," I said to him. "If you are anxious to know whether your sister is wedding an honorable man, I can refer you to plenty of reputable people who will tell you that I have always borne an honorable reputation.

"Then he began to berate me afresh, and termed me once more an adventurer.

"I did not perceive his meaning, and asked: 'Is any man who seeks to wed a woman an adventurer?'

"You know very well that Martha is a rich girl," he stormed. 'All you're after is her money.'

"I was struck with astonishment.

"I assure you, as I assured him then, that I had had no idea of my loved one being wealthy.

"But he gave me the lie right to my face, and again it was only the greatest effort at calmness on my part that saved Moses Bumpus from a thrashing.

"Gradually I learned from his heated words that their parents had died two years previous, and had left a fortune amounting to some sixty thousand dollars, to be evenly divided between brother and sister.

"Still I persisted in my demand for Martha's hand.

"And, equally persistent, he refused me again and again.

"At last he went so far as to order me from the house, though it was late in the night, and there was no inn in the village.

"This angered me almost beyond control, but it was his house, and I obeyed.

"I went to my room for my valise.

"As I was leaving, the door of Martha's room opened.

"She was about to ask me of the success of my mission, but paused, for my face must have told her all.

"And why are you leaving here at this hour of the night?" she inquired.

"Because your brother has ordered me to leave the house," I answered.

"Wait," was all she said.

"I stood there in the hallway, like one dazed, not knowing what to do or say.

"Less than five minutes passed, when her door again opened, and she stood before me, dressed as if for a journey, and carrying a valise, like myself.

"Since my brother's house is no longer large enough to hold you, it shall not hold me, either," she said, quietly. "I will go with you, Henry, and I shall not return until my brother is ready to receive you also."

"But where will you go?" I cried.

"Do you love me, Henry?"

"As my life."

"Then I will go with you. We will find a minister who shall make us man and wife."

"I tried to persuade her that she was doing a foolish thing in thus leaving the protection of her home in the middle of the night.

"But Martha was firm, and what could I do, who loved her so? Was I to refuse her that protection which she declined at her brother's hands, and demanded at mine?"

"Our controversy did not last long.

"I was only too willing to be persuaded by the dear girl. We left the house together, but went out boldly. It was only by chance that we did not encounter Moses Bumpus in leaving.

"Martha, not caring to create any scandal in the village, opposed my proposition that we call upon the Rev. Mr. Elkins, or that I engage any of the neighbors to drive us to another town. So we trudged along on foot, and it was daylight when we reached Rutledge, footsore and exhausted.

"I induced my tired sweetheart to take a couple of hours' rest at the hotel, while I busied myself in securing a marriage license

and a clergyman. Two hours later Martha and I were married. Then we took the train and went to Conway, a small town about one hundred miles from here.

"As soon as we arrived at Conway, Martha wrote her brother, Moses Bumpus, and informed him of all that had happened. She added that if he was willing to receive us both cordially we would return to Wadeville. If not, he must not expect to see either of us again.

"Weeks passed by, but no answer came from Moses Bumpus. We knew then that he declined a reconciliation.

"We decided not to contest with Bumpus for Martha's rights as an equal heir in their late parents' estate. That, if anything, would convince him that I had not been actuated by mercenary motives.

"But I could not afford to be idle.

"I had only a few hundreds in ready money, and must begin work at my chosen profession.

"About this time I received a most flattering offer.

"It was a position as assistant engineer in the construction of one of the great railroads that was then being pushed across the far Western plains.

"The salary that went with the offer was far more than anything I could hope to make in the East for a number of years. Yet the life and surroundings of the Western railroad camp were not such as I could take my young bride into.

"And so I hesitated about accepting that offer, flattering as it was.

"I referred the matter to my young wife for decision.

"It offers you an opportunity for rapid advancement in your profession," she said. "Perhaps you had better go. Yes, I am quite sure, Henry, that you had better go. After all, what does the separation of a year or two mean, when we have all our lives before us?"

"So I went.

"Martha nearly broke down when the day of separation came, and I was on the point of flatly refusing to go.

"But she, brave little woman, still persisted that I must make my way in the world, regardless of sentiment.

"Life was stirring in the West. We wrote each other frequently at first, and gradually became quite reconciled to a temporary separation.

"Finally, however, our surveying party got so far away from civilization that mail was forwarded only at long intervals, and finally not at all.

"For months and months I did not hear from Martha, nor she from me. One day we were attacked by Indians; we were victorious, but I was severely wounded.

"Fortunately, there was a surgeon in the party. I was given as good care as possible in that wild country, and as soon as I was well enough I decided to return to New England until I was strong enough to once more endure the rigors of a Western railroad camp.

"I went to Conway, full of happiness at the idea of meeting my dear wife so soon again.

"The woman with whom I had left Martha looked at me with pitying eyes, and replied:

"A man who said he was her brother took her away."

"Full of resentment, and also fearing that Moses Bumpus had succeeded in estranging my wife from me, I hurried to Wadeville, arriving there at night.

"Moses Bumpus was at home. There was another man—a young fellow—with him. My brother-in-law was as startled as if a ghost had confronted him.

"We heard you had been killed by Indians," he gasped.

"No, I was only wounded," I replied. "Where is my wife?"

"Dead," he answered.

"You lie!" I shouted.

"It is the truth," he said, sneeringly. "And I buried her as Martha Bumpus. No one knows, or ever shall know, that she was your wife."

"You scoundrel!" I cried, and sprang at him.

"His companion, whose name was Fenton, tried to separate us.

"I turned on Fenton.

"Hit him with the club, Moses," shouted the latter.

"I saw Fenton's scoundrelly eyes glaring triumphantly at me.

"Then all was black.

"I remember nothing that happened after that."

## CHAPTER XXI.

## A DISAPPOINTING QUEST.

Henry Goodnow paused.

He passed his hand across his brow, with the same peculiar movement as he had done all through the narration of his strange story.

"I feel exhausted," he complained.

"Take another swallow of wine," advised Dr. Todd, pouring it out for him.

"Thank you; that puts fresh strength in me."

Our hero was as far as ever from learning that which most concerned him.

"What happened after? Try to think," urged Ben.

Goodnow shook his head.

"It is no use, my friend. I cannot remember. The very last recollection I have is the fiendish face of Fenton."

Ben Spencer turned away with a feeling of sickening disappointment.

"There is a great deal to be conjectured, since we have no means of proving certain important facts," said Dr. Todd, who had entered into the quest of Goodnow and our hero with great enthusiasm.

"In the first place," continued the man of medicine, "the last that you remember, Goodnow, is that Fenton told the deacon to club you. That the deacon most certainly did so, causing a fracture of the skull.

"By the time that you recovered consciousness, the fracture had so affected your brain that you were deprived of memory. Since that time, until your recovery, you were an idiot.

"It might be well worth our while to find out, if possible, what your movements were during the first of that period of idiocy. I remember quite well the time when Jake first put in an appearance in this village.

"I should say that you came here about four months subsequent to the time you were so fearfully assaulted in Bumpus' house. It may be that you had some papers or memoranda about you at that time that would be useful to you now. If so, of course they must be found, for without ample proof of your strange story, you cannot make good your claim to your wife's estate."

Goodnow shook his head.

"Unless my memory is treacherous, I had no papers of great importance about me that night I visited Moses Bumpus. Stay, though! I remember I had one bulky envelope in an inner vest pocket. My impression, after all these years, is, that they were some papers connected with the railway company by which I was employed."

"They may be of great importance to you, then, in proving your identity," cried Dr. Todd. "Those papers must be found, if such a thing is possible."

"An impossible quest now, I fear," sighed Mr. Goodnow.

"How so?"

"They were probably taken from me by Bumpus or Fenton. Thinking, perhaps, that they had killed me, they would naturally search through my clothing, and destroy every possible clew to my identity."

Dr. Todd shook his head vigorously.

"Those papers are still in existence," he contested, stubbornly.

"Why do you believe it?"

"Well, it may sound like a foolish thing for a matter-of-fact man of medicine to say, but I have a premonition that we shall yet unearth those papers."

"I have an idea," cried Ben, who had been listening intently.

"Out with it, then."

"Jake's cabin."

"Well, what of it?"

"I have heard that he has occupied the shanty ever since he came to Wadenville. If so, he may have placed the papers somewhere in the cabin during his early occupancy of it."

Henry Goodnow looked thoughtful.

But Dr. Todd sprang to his feet, shouting:

"You have it, Ben; you have it. We must search that cabin. We may not find the papers, but I have an inexplicable belief that we shall find something there."

"Then let us go at once," urged Ben.

"Yes, this night—now," coincided Dr. Todd.

Henry Goodnow smiled.

"You are two very impulsive persons," he commented.

"While you, who are the most concerned, sit back and appear indisposed to do anything," rejoined the physician, reproachfully.

"No; I will go with you," said Goodnow, quietly.

"Go! of course you will. Remember, my dear sir, that you are not yet out of my professional care, and I prescribe a walk for you, to be taken immediately."

The discussion ended. They drew on their overcoats and went out into the night.

"It is rather warm for a December night," commented the physician, pausing a moment before his door. "I suspect it is likely to rain, so I will take a couple of umbrellas along."

Ben, who had been provided with a lantern by Dr. Todd, led the way to the cabin in the woods.

The door of the little shanty was open, and they entered.

Henry Goodnow surveyed the interior with considerable interest.

"And so I lived here for many years?" he questioned. "It is strange, but the scene does not conjure up even one familiar memory."

"Not in the least strange," retorted Dr. Todd, sharply, "and we came here for other purposes than conjuring. A storm is coming up. Let us finish our search as soon as possible, and hurry home before we get a drenching."

Without more ado they searched every possible nook in the shanty, even going to the trouble of lifting all the loose boards in the floor.

All this was done without making a single important discovery.

They were about to leave, when a fitful gust blew through the open door of the cabin.

The lantern was extinguished, and they found themselves in utter darkness.

The next instant rain began to fall in a deluge.

"We are caught," muttered Dr. Todd. "We mustn't try to leave while the rain pours down like this. Light the lantern, Ben."

Ben tried, but the wild gale of wind blew out all the matches as fast as they were struck.

There was no help for it. They would have to remain in the dark.

But not for long, for a brilliant flash of lightning illuminated the little shanty, followed, after an interval of a few seconds, by an ominous muttering of thunder.

It was one of those climatic freaks not infrequent in New England—a thunderstorm in winter.

It would have been absolute folly to have ventured out in that furious storm, so the little party waited patiently for a lull.

While they waited, footsteps were heard of some one approaching. The fugitive from the storm entered the cabin, and stood in darkness by the door, until a sudden flash of lightning illuminated the interior, and revealed the newcomer as Deacon Bumpus.

"Deacon Bumpus!" shouted Dr. Todd.

The words were almost inaudible in the angry crash of thunder that followed the lightning.

But the deacon heard, and he recognized his enemies in the same illumination that revealed him to them.

The old man would have taken refuge in flight had not Henry Goodnow sprung between him and the door.

"No, no, Moses, you shall not escape me now."

"Have mercy, Henry Goodnow," whined the deacon. "I will do you justice."

"Ah, you admit that I am Henry Goodnow—your dead sister's husband?"

"Yes, yes! But don't strike me—don't kill me."

"You poor scoundrel," muttered Goodnow, contemptuously, "I shall do worse than kill you. I shall strip from you your sanctimonious mantle, and, even worse, I shall demand an accounting of my dead wife's estate and take from you thousands of your hoarded dollars. Thirty thousand dollars, with accumulated interest. Think of it, Moses Bumpus, you who worship money so!"

"I will do you justice," groaned the deacon, piteously. "But Martha's fortune was not as large as you suppose. It did not amount to over \$20,000. Half of that I will pay over to you, but the other half belongs to me."

"The courts must settle that point," retorted Goodnow.

"You will gain nothing by going to law," urged the deacon, thinking with anguish of the money that he must give up.

Ben now stepped forward, and another flash of lightning revealed his pale, determined face to the old man's terrified gaze.

"Hear me, Deacon Bumpus," cried the boy. "I am the son of Henry and Martha Goodnow. Tell me that it is so."

"Another heir!" shouted the agonized Bumpus. "You would rob a poor man of all his money! No, no, no, boy, you are not Martha's son."

"Swear it, if you dare!"

Deacon Bumpus raised one withered hand aloft.

"I swear, as Heaven is my judge," he faltered, "that Martha Goodnow gave birth to no child!"

A blinding flash and a deafening crash of thunder came simultaneously.

The electric current had struck the cabin, and prostrated all its occupants.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### CONFESSION.

The storm raged with increased fury—that wildness which announces the end.

The wind howled fitfully.

Frequent flashes of lightning illuminated the forest, but there was no more thunder.

Amid these weird surroundings, Ben Spencer regained consciousness.

He finally arose to a sitting posture, conscious only of dimmed faculties and a dull headache.

His mind gradually became clearer.

Then, on his hands and knees, he groped about the cabin.

His hand passed over the face of some one.

"Who is that?"

"Is that you, doctor?"

"Thank Heaven, you were not killed by the flash."

"No, only stunned. But what of Goodnow?"

They groped together until they found him.

He slowly recovered.

"Who are you?" he cried.

"Dr. Todd and Ben."

A flash of lightning illuminated the cabin, showing Deacon Bumpus prostrate by the door.

Dr. Todd seized him by the shoulder and shook him.

"Come, come, man, get up!"

No response.

"He is hurt worse than we are," muttered Todd.

"Is he dead?" Ben asked, in an awed tone.

"I don't know. He is terribly still."

The doctor felt for the old man's pulse.

"There is a feeble movement of the pulse," he said, finally. "He still lives, but we must get him away from here."

"He must not die until he has told us all," protested Mr. Goodnow.

"Nor even then, if we can help it," Dr. Todd responded, gravely. "A human life is precious, no matter whose it is. But how shall we get Bumpus away from here? We can't carry him."

"I will go for my horse and wagon," Ben answered. "It isn't far from here, and I can be back in twenty minutes."

"Get here sooner if you can," urged Dr. Todd. "Time may be precious to us."

The storm was abating now, and Ben ran as swiftly as possible to the barn in the rear of the blacksmith shop, where Tom Foley and he kept their turnout.

As quickly as he could Ben had the horse harnessed to the wagon, and drove down a narrow road that ran into the forest past the cabin.

Goodnow and the doctor were waiting.

They lifted the body of the still unconscious Bumpus into the wagon, after which they got in themselves.

"Drive slowly now," ordered the doctor.

"To the deacon's home?"

"Yes."

So necessary was it to go slowly that twenty minutes were consumed in reaching the deacon's house, less than a mile distant from the cabin.

A light burned in the window of the deacon's sitting-room.

Patience Marston, the housekeeper, hurried to the door when she heard the sound of wheels.

"Who's there?" she called.

"Dr. Todd, and others, bringing the deacon home."

"Goodness! Has anything happened to him?"

"Yes, a lightning stroke."

The housekeeper very nearly went into hysterics when she heard this.

Dr. Todd gave his orders calmly, and, a few minutes later, the old man was undressed and put into his own bed.

Stimulants were administered, but it was some time before Moses Bumpus recovered consciousness.

When he did, he moaned:

"Where am I? What's happened?"

"You were struck by lightning, just after appealing to Heaven!" Dr. Todd answered, solemnly.

With a shriek of terror, the deacon pushed back the bedclothes and sat bolt upright, staring about him with a wild gaze.

Patience Marston, frightened beyond expression, fled from the room.

"Was that Heaven's judgment?" moaned the stricken wretch.

"You know best," rejoined Dr. Todd. "Did you perjure yourself when you called upon Heaven to witness?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" shrieked the old man. "I called upon Heaven to witness, an' I lied. It was judgment!"

Deacon Moses Bumpus sat staring straight before him now—his face showing unreasonable, idiotic terror.

Gradually he became a little calmer.

"But if I was struck by lightnin', why ain't I dead?" he muttered. "Lightnin' allus kills. Don't I know? Didn't I lose my brown mare that way?"

"It does not always kill," returned the doctor. "Sometimes it only stuns. We three were also stunned, because, probably, we were in the company of a perjurer."

The old man shook, and his teeth chattered.

"Is Henry Goodnow here?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"An' Ben Spencer?"

"Yes."

The deacon was silent for a few moments, during which he endured the agony of his torturing thoughts.

"D'ye think I'm a-goin' t' die?" he cried, at last, looking appealingly at Dr. Todd.

"God alone knows, deacon."

"But you know, doctor; tell me."

"I don't know yet."

"But I say you do. Tell me—be I a-goin' t' die?"

"Your recovery, deacon, may depend upon how easy your mind is for the next twenty-four hours."

Again the old man was silent, evidently contending with his torturing thoughts.

"Will it make my mind easier, if I tell the truth?" he asked, piteously, when some moments had passed.

"It cannot fail to," was the doctor's response.

"But I've got somethin' terribul t' tell."

"All the more reason for telling it."

Another pause and a longer one.

"Doctor," moaned the stricken wretch, "I wouldn't dare t' go t' the Almighty until I've told the truth. I will confess—I will, I will!"

It was piteous, the frantic terror of this old man who feared that his blackened soul would soon be in the presence of its Maker.

He writhed for some moments like one in physical torture.

Then he opened his eyes once more, and moaned:

"It is a long, long story. How shall I begin?"

Ben stepped forward, intent upon helping him.

"You denied, Deacon Bumpus, that I am the son of Henry and Martha Goodnow. Am I, or am I not?"

"Yes, yes, boy, ye are."

"Then why could I not find any record of my birth in the public records at Conway?"

"Because no record was ever made."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I bribed the doctor."

"I do not understand you."

"I—I bribed the doctor to make no report of your birth."

"Why?"

"Because he said Marthy could not live long."

"What had that to do with concealing my birth?"

"Why—why, don't ye understand?" cried the deacon, with strange eagerness. "Don't ye see, Ben, that if Marthy died, leavin' no baby, an' if it never got out 'bout her bein' married, why then all her money would come back to me, her only heir."

"What was the exact amount of your sister's fortune, deacon?" interposed Dr. Todd. "Remember that you are confessing, and that you are bound to tell the truth now."

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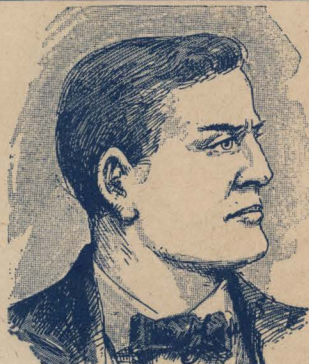
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